HEAVY OBJECT Volume 3

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ヘヴィーオブジェクト 巨人達の影

巨大兵器オブジェクトが世界のバランスを支配し、物事の全てを決める。シンプルで安全で、クリーンな国際競争を行う場所。それが俺たちの『戦場』だ。こんな最前線から兵士が去っていく一番の理由は、負傷でも戦死でもなく、基地内における男女間の恋愛問題のこじれだったりする。そう。今時、戦場で死ぬなんて流行らない。

――――はずだったのだが、

「「クソッたれ!!　どこのどの辺が安全でクリーンな戦場だちくしょう!!」」

爆乳美人上官フローレイティアは、今日も今日とて、ごく自然に戦地留学生クウェンサーと貴族なのに下っ端軍人ヘイヴィアの二人をオブジェクトだらけの戦場に放り込んでいた。

相変わらずな二人の敵は、以前出会った「おほほ」と笑うあのエリート女と、そいつが駆るオブジェクト。ヤバそうな予感バリバリで、しかもなぜか我らがお姫様の機嫌も悪く……これが恋愛問題のこじれってやつなのか？

ハイテンションな近未来アクション、懲りずに第三弾だ！

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
戦列 II
Global Shadow 巨人達の影

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン／凪良 NAGIRYO

電撃文庫

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ヘヴィーオブジェクト 巨人達の影

鎌池和馬

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KAZUMA KAMACHI

イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン
凪良 NAGIRYO

結局、戦争はなくならなかった。
でも、変化はあった。
――超大型兵器オブジェクト。
それが、戦争の全てを変えた。

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT
Global shadow 巨人達の影

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【ラッシュ】RUSH

『情報同盟』軍所属の陸戦特化型第二世代オブジェクト。
全長100メートル、最高速度時速530キロを誇る対オブジェクト用駆逐兵器。

移動方式は、まず空気圧を利用したエアクッションで機体を浮かせ、その後キャタピラで地面を削り取るように前進するという方式を採用している。機体質量軽減のため、装甲にはカーボン、アミラド等を含む複合装甲を使用し、高速移動を可能とした。

主砲は連速ビーム式ガトリング砲で、連射時の冷却時間を稼ぐため、左右に一門ずつ配備。特徴的な主砲は、自軍で『ガトリング033』という名で呼ばれる由来にもなった。副砲はレールガン、コイルガンなどを装備、メインカラーリングはグレーで統一されている。

搭乗エリートは、「おほほ」が口癖の女性。自国では国民的アイドルとして活躍中だからか、パイロットスーツはハイレグレオタード型で、Gカップボディという彼女の魅力を存分に活かす仕様となっている。

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 inc.)

name / secret

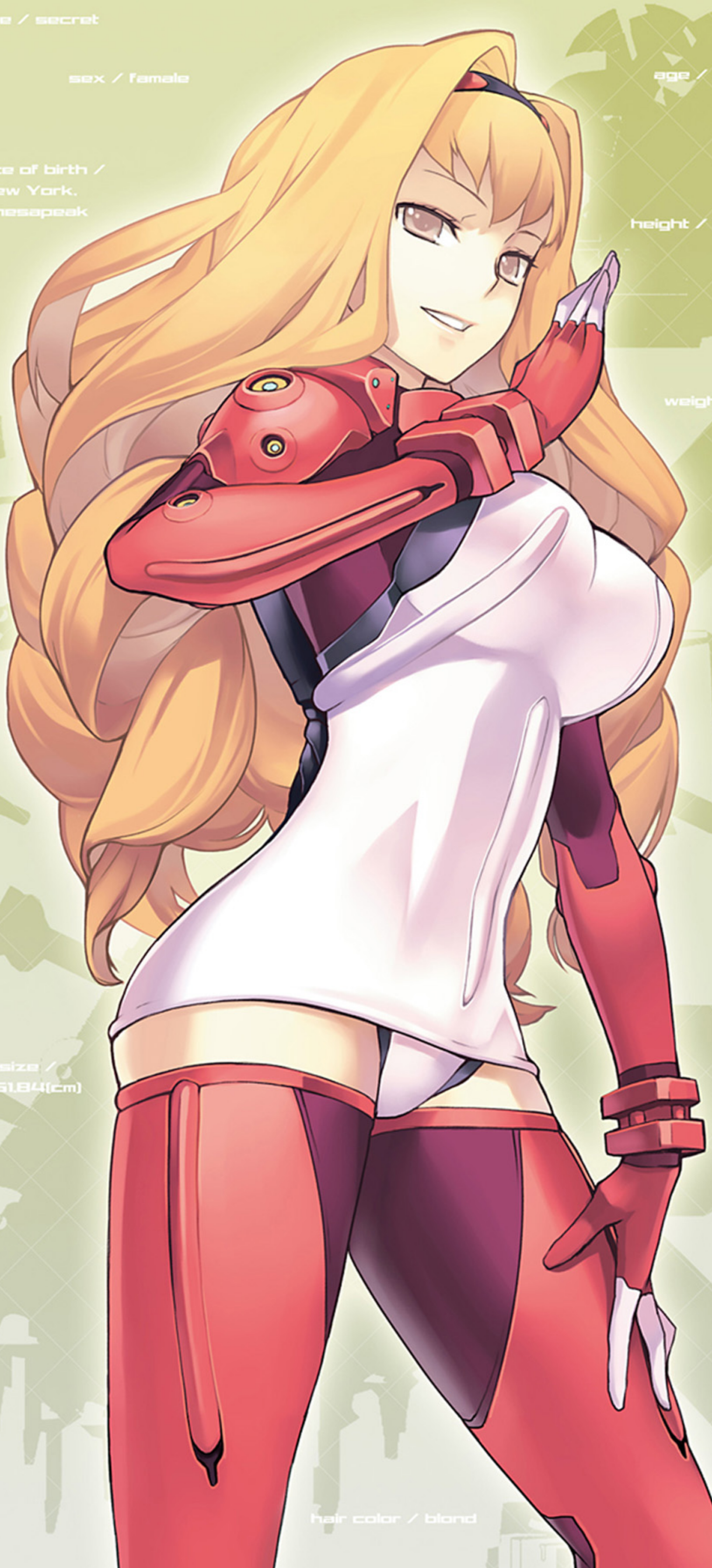
sex / female

place of birth /
New York.
Chesapeak

age / secret

height / 1.63m

weight / 48kg



body size /
98.61.84(cm)

hair color / blond

eye color / brown

class / Captain

belong / Sky Dog(br)
3rd C.E.B.

post / Elite

「正統王国」第37機動整備大隊所属オブジェクト
「ベイビーマグナム」に搭乗する「エリート」

ミリンダ

「……どうしてここであのにくたらしい女が出てくるの？」

人生を効率良く生きていきたい戦地派遣留学生の少年＆変わり者の貴族にして不良系軍人

クウェンサー＆ヘイヴィア

「クソッたれ!!　どこのどの辺が安全でクリーンな戦場だちくしょう!!」

部隊や階級を超えて、戦場での犯罪行為、不当な捕虜の扱いなどの督戦権限を持つ「黒軍服」の女性将校

シャルロット

「貴君、所属と階級は？」

敵国「正統王国」にて作戦行動中の、「資本企業」軍をクライアントに持つ傭兵会社社員

ワイディーネ

「私達は戦場お掃除サービス。ご用命の際は公式ウェブページの専用フォームからどうぞ」

次に会ったら敵同士。
待っているのは殺し合い。

――とある僻地勤務の兵士のつぶやき

HEAVY OBJECT
global shadow

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
巨人達の影

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

Prologue

Hey.

Which one do you belong to?

The Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, or the Faith Organization?

There are many different world powers. There are even more if you include more unusual places like the moon and blank areas that belong to none of the others.

Well, it really doesn't matter which one you belong to.

You can just choose which one best matches your principles and your tastes.

That's all that really matters.

Almost half the world is covered by safe countries where no other weapons exist and that are protected by the powerful Objects owned by their respective world powers. And if you go to the moon, a blank area, or anywhere else that is deemed to be away from any major trouble based on the flow of worldly matters, you can have a similarly peaceful life.

However…

If you are looking through the world powers in search of a perfect paradise that lacks any of the problems of this world…well, let me stop you right now.

It isn't that simple.

A place like that may exist in the world, but I certainly have never heard of one.

There will always be problems.

There will always be faults.

Ha ha. What's with that sullen look? An excellent reaction. Those are the eyes of someone who has not yet given up hope. To be honest, I'm jealous. Since you made me jealous, I'll tell you a bit of a story. Oh, don't worry. Someone with that look in their eyes won't be swayed even slightly by a little story like this.

Yes.

That's right.

Okay, how about I get started?

This is a story about the shadows of those world powers you believe in so much.

Chapter 1: A Grave of Junk is a Mountain of Rare Metals >> Interception at the Remains of the Alaska Battlefield

Part 1

There was once an Object known as the Water Strider.

It was a cutting edge Generation 2 Object. The monstrous Object had travelled smoothly across the snowy plains using static electricity, and had been able to pierce the armor of enemy Objects with two low-stability plasma cannons on either side even though not even a nuclear weapon could do the same.

A normal Generation 1 Object would have had a hard time standing up to the Water Strider, but a battlefield student who had come to study Object design and a noble radar analyst who had come to amass valiant deeds had managed to blow it to pieces. That was 2 months ago.

And now…

"We're back, Alaska. I'm glad to see you're even colder than when I saw you last."

"Hey, Quenser. Let's ditch this work and go look for Santa Claus's house or something."

"I thought Santa lived in Scandinavia."

"You'd have to ask the Faith Organization about that one. Wait, he changed the color of his clothes in a soft drink commercial, so would he be with the Capitalist Corporations? He might actually be relaxing in some company's health facility."

Quenser and Heivia of the Legitimacy Kingdom chatted as they walked through the snow.

One had blond hair and the only way to determine his gender at first glance was whether he was wearing pants or a skirt. He was a commoner battlefield student named Quenser.

The other had short brown hair and a somewhat muscular build . He was a noble radar analysis specialist named Heivia.

They were not walking through a white winter scene that filled one with the wonders of nature.

It was true that there were not any areas where the bare ground was visible. The white covered the ground all the way to the horizon.

However, strange metal pieces of art were scattered about.

That was the remains of the Second Generation Object known as the Water Strider. A small screw would be buried beneath the snow, but these masses of steel were 20 meters or more across. Main cannons that looked like bent metal bridges created a large wall blocking the way along that plain.

"I've gotta admit, this is pretty damn amazing," muttered Heivia as he scratched at his head. "It looks like a volcano erupted. There's wreckage as far as the eye can see. That blast was pointed up, but I think some of these things flew a few hundred meters away."

"Some things probably flew kilometers. But it was a 200,000 ton Object. It isn't that easy to retrieve the parts. And that goes for us as much as it does for the other side."

"I was wondering what those gloomy intelligence guys were so busy doing. I guess they must be analyzing the technology on site as well as stripping it of any rare metals."

"We can leave all that to them, so let's get on with our own job."

Quenser then half-slid down a relatively gently sloped cliff. He was heading for a spot a few meters down. Fragments of the Water Strider could be seen glittering there, but either due to the area that exploded or the direction of the wind, no pieces larger than 10 meters were there.

That was the problem.

And Quenser had been called in as a combat engineer to solve that problem.

"Okay, okay." Quenser gently tapped the cliff he had come down from with his palm. "The surface is already crumbling. It seems like a waste to use this expensive Hand Axe on it."

"Everything looks fine up above too," said Heivia when he came sliding down shortly thereafter. "Just open up a 5 meter crack and all the wreckage should come sliding down. And that includes an entire leg belonging to that damn Water Strider."

"And we can use that to hold it back," replied Quenser offhandedly as he assembled an electric drill.

It was a model used for road construction rather than for work around the house, so the actual drill itself was 50-70 cm across. He held the electric drill about level with the cliff slope and pressed the trigger-like button.

After drilling a few holes in the cliff face, Quenser said, "Stick a bomb in the areas I mark. Afterwards, cover them up with the metal plates I gave you beforehand. Then cover it all back up with dirt. That way the energy of the bomb will be directed into the cliff ."

"Fine, fine. Honestly, this is as much of a pain in the ass as squeezing whipped cream onto a cake. A gram of this explosive is more expensive than a gram of platinum, right? It's really powerful stuff, so can't you just place it wherever and have the cliff collapse?"

"Are you complaining this much because you had to carry around all the spare batteries for the drill?"

"I'm complaining because I'm a radar analyst and yet am out in the snow working with drills. Can't we just blow it up already so we can head back?"

"Surely you know that you set up bombs differently for different situations. Even a powerful explosive won't do much damage if all of the energy escapes."

"Didn't you come here to learn about Object design?"

"I'm not doing this because I want to, but I have to make myself useful if I'm going to stay here. And the same goes for you, you delinquent soldier."

After creating all the small pockets in the cliff, Quenser too began setting up the bombs.

But then he frowned.

Heivia had realized it too.

"Hey, I put just a fuse inside to test the detonation signal receiver, but it isn't responding to the radio signal. Is the dirt or the metal plate cutting off the signal?"

"Dammit, this wasn't my plan." Quenser clicked his tongue with a puff of white breath. "Froleytia's an excellent commander, but she has a tendency to make up the small details on the fly."

"We can grope those giant tits of hers over this later, but what are we supposed to do now, Quenser?"

"We'll have to use a timed fuse rather than a radio one. The signal doesn't matter then."

"What should I set as the detonation time?"

"1700 hours. That's about 20 minutes from now."

There was a reason they set it to detonate at a specific time. If they set it to detonate after a certain number of minutes, the time spent between setting up each bomb would result in them not detonating simultaneously.

After setting up all of the bombs along the cliff face, Quenser and Heivia quickly left. After all, they had fewer than 10 minutes left.

"Hey, Quenser. With that much explosive, how far away do we need to get in order to be safe?"

"The blast is directed inward, so 50 meters should be enough to avoid being deafened given the shockwave. But it couldn't hurt to be extra safe."

"Froleytia wouldn't shut up about not leaving footprints, but it' s not like we can help it with this snow."

"With the blizzard today, it should all be gone after a few minutes."

While chatting some more, the two boys made it about 100 meters away.

Heivia suddenly looked like he had just realized he had forgotten to lock the front door after heading out.

"Hm? Oh, I think I messed up!!"

"What is it, Heivia?"

"I might have entered the number without switching the fuse mode first. So instead of setting the timer, I might have set the frequency to 1700. I-I need to go check."

"Now!? They're going to detonate in less than 10 minutes!!"

"I just need to run over and check, then run right back!!"

"You can't!! Just wait until 1700 hours. If they don't detonate then, we can go back and check. Okay, okay!?"

"You're the one that said the bombs have to be set up to match the situation. If the ones I set up don't do anything and yours blow up properly, we won't get the results we want, will we?"

"You're right…" Quenser trailed off.

"C'mon, c'mon. We just have to get it over with real quick. Hurry up!" urged Heivia.

"Eh? Me too? This was your mistake, not mine!!"

With Quenser being dragged along in bewilderment, the two of them started back toward the cliff.

They were about 100 meters away.

After travelling 30 of those meters…

A huge explosion suddenly erupted from the cliff before 1700 hours had arrived.

As Quenser and Heivia approached defenselessly, the sudden shockwave knocked them onto their backs. Quenser had said they would be safe as long as they were 50 meters away, but that was only if they were crouched down preparing for the shock. He had not been talking about if they were defenselessly standing straight up.

While the two of them were sinking into the snow on the ground, Quenser started beating Heivia with his fists.

"You idiot!! You idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot, idioooottt!!"

"Ow!! My bad, my bad!!"

"You didn't just forget to set it properly! You set the time too soon!! You did the ones in that area, right!? And you didn't set the metal plates right either, did you!? If you had, the blast wouldn't have reached this far!!"

"Yeah, but we would've been killed if I hadn't set the time so soon. It all turned out all right in the end."

"Depending on the situation, this kind of mistake could ruin an entire military operation! That could lead to an entire unit being killed!!"

"Quenser! Hey, Quenser!"

"Don't interrupt me when I'm just getting warmed up!! I'm legitimately mad here!! Look, the cliff only partially collapsed. Our first objective for today was completely-…!!"

"No, it's almost 1700 hours!! The bombs you set are going to detonate!!'

"Eh?"

Quenser looked over blankly.

In the next instant, the second wave of explosions occurred.

Those two idiots had finally managed to lift their upper bodies from the snow, but they were knocked back into the exact same position as before due to the shockwave. A pain ran through their heads like spikes were being stabbed into their brains through both ears.

After a short silence, Heivia finally managed to clench his fists.

"You idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot, idioooottt!! You didn't set up the metal plates right, either!! If you had, that shockwave would never have reached us!!"

"My bad, my bad!! Ow! I'm sorry about acting so full of myself when I was rushing things, too!!"

However, the cliff still collapsed thanks to an unexpected coincidence.

The collapse of the cliff brought Water Strider wreckage down with it. Among the wreckage was a leg that looked like a twisted steel pylon and a mass of armor that was over 10 meters long.

The two of them had gotten into a scuffle in the snow, but they froze in place at that unexpected result.

Quenser spoke up first.

"Hmm. It seems the wreckage rolled down far enough to plug up the area between cliffs."

"And that will block the path of the convoy trying to pass by below." Heivia frowned. "I know they can't move things this heavy so easily, but will this really work? Using such huge pieces of wreckage for a wall also means the gaps are huge."

"There's an ambush set up to deal with that." Quenser pointed out into the snowy plain. "There are tiny fragments a few centimeters or a few millimeters across scattered all over the place. That's why we can't just send in giant cranes to deal with this. Those caltrops would blow the tires."

"So I guess stage 1 was a success."

"Yes." Quenser disassembled the large electric drill that was no longer needed. "We have the foundation we need to confine the Information Alliance Object."

Part 2

It all started three days prior.

That was the day Quenser and Heivia were flown to Alaska while complaining as usual.

"Our enemy this time is an Information Alliance Object. It is a cutting edge Generation 2 Object that we at the Legitimacy Kingdom military have codenamed Rush," said Froleytia, their silver-haired, large-breasted, and Japanese-obsessed commander.

This was not part of an official pre-mission briefing.

It was after she had discovered the billiards table those two idiots had made out of scrap wood and had lectured them for two hours straight. After she had made sure they had taken official responsibility for that, Froleytia's expression became more cheerful and they started playing a game of pool to kill time.

In a disgusted tone of voice, Quenser said, "Taking on a Second Generation Object in Alaska? I have a bad feeling about that."

"Make sure not to mention that we're fighting atop the freezing cold snow of Alaska in front of the princess. It would only anger her." Froleytia sighed before continuing. "The remains of the Water Strider that became our nightmare are still strewn across Alaska. We want to analyze the technology there, but it's just too much to easily transport away."

The wreckage from the previous Baby Magnum was still there too, but the Legitimacy Kingdom had no real reason to look into it. They would only strip it of rare metals to reuse them.

"Can't we just hook it to one of our Objects and tow it out of there?" said Heivia who was exhibiting his position as a noble by holding the cue skillfully.

Froleytia smoked her kiseru with even more annoyance and said, "The area is still fiercely fought over, so Objects are commonly coming and going. What if a different Object targets ours while doing that? We would just end up with another souvenir to analyze the technology of."

"Is that so?" muttered Heivia offhandedly.

However, the conversation must have affected his concentration because the cue ball he struck was swallowed up by one of the pockets.

Froleytia removed the kiseru from her mouth with one hand and said, "Heivia, I'm going to perform a middle kick, so stick your ass out this way."

"Where the hell did that come from!?"

"Quiet. Hitting the cue ball into a pocket without getting a single other ball in is punished with a kick to the ass where I come from. Okay, lower your knees a bit and…yes, right there. Now, don't move. If you dodge it, you get two."

"Dammit. The thrill in your voice is scaring me, you sadistic queen!!"

Froleytia's lovely leg shot out like a whip before Heivia could complain any more. With a ridiculous crack as if from a real whip, Heivia collapsed to the ground holding his ass despite all his military training.

"Gyahh!? The boot's air conditioning motor!!"

Quenser had known Heivia for a while, but he had never heard that kind of voice come from him before.

Meanwhile, Froleytia put the kiseru back in her mouth and spoke with an unconcerned look on her face.

"Hmm. I may be a weak little girl, but I am good at doing that."

"…Y-you liar. You could never pull that off without thoroughly training your entire body…" groaned Heivia.

Ignoring him, Froleytia took the cue from Quenser who was trembling in fear. She then headed for the billiards table.

"Getting back on topic, the remains of the Water Strider are strewn about Alaska. Those remains are full of treasure both of the soft and hard variety. We can learn from the technology used in its design, from the electronic programs it used, and it's also full of military secrets. Not to mention all the rare metals inside. Also, we might also learn something about the techniques of the artisans that made the armor from the composition of the highly heat resistant materials and the balance of heat treatment. Since we were the ones that blew up the Faith Organization's Water Strider,

we naturally have the right to the benefits of that analysis. However, we are not the only ones that want those benefits."

Froleytia aimed the cue at the white cue ball, staring down a straight line from the ball. She was so focused on the game that she did not seem to notice that her ass inside her tight skirt was sticking out toward Quenser.

"We have learned that some intelligence agents from the Information Alliance snuck in there a few weeks ago, but they went too far. We were ordered to destroy the quickly constructed antenna facility they were preparing in order to transmit information on the technology they had analyzed. I doubt the Information Alliance will take that sitting down, so they will likely send an Arctic Object in."

"And that's the Generation 2 Rush…?"

"You've already seen it, Quenser."

The high pitched noise of a number of balls striking each other rang out and the 3 ball was swallowed up by a pocket. Froleytia circled around the table with a delighted spring in her step.

"That's the one we fought alongside during the liberation of that Oceanian military nation. Its two rapid fire beam cannon Gatling guns were its trademark."

Hearing that, Quenser almost brought his hand to his forehead.

"(…That G-cup 'Oh ho ho'!?)"

His bitter expression was not simply because he had to fight someone he knew. They did belong to enemy nations after all.

It was because he knew just how powerful the Object that "Oh ho ho" piloted was. The rapid fire beam cannon Gatling guns it used as its main weapons were more powerful than the princess's main cannons when it came to brute force. The odds were good the enemy would simply maintain an ideal distance, and blow away their Object's armor in no time at all without giving any chance to evade.

Froleytia would have gone through all sorts of data on it beforehand when coming up with the strategy, and she seemed to realize what Quenser was worried about.

"We won't be fighting it head on. Not even the higher ups are expecting that of us. This is more of a job for our decorated combat engineers."

"Wait! Wait just a second!! I like that even less!! That's just putting all the danger on us! I've been wondering, why does this unit seem completely incapable of sending an Object after an Object like normal units do!?"

"It's no good, Quenser. You heard that thrill in her voice, right? That's the tone she gets when she's hoping for a good reaction from us when she asks something ridiculous of us," said Heivia with tears in his eyes as he continued to hold his ass.

Froleytia targeted the next ball and pouted the lips that held her kiseru.

"Don't talk about me like I use my position to harass you. The princess still takes the leading role while you only have supporting roles, so don't worry. You just have to take care of some simple demolition wor-…Hm!?"

Her sudden exclamation was due to the cue ball unexpectedly veering a bit diagonally after she struck it with the cue. The conversation must have affected her concentration.

The cue ball struck the edge of the table a few times before being swallowed up by a corner pocket.

"…"

"…"

"…"

The three remained silent for a bit.

In order to break that awkward silence, Froleytia squeezed the cue with all her strength, held it out toward Quenser, and opened her eyes wide.

"You're up next, Quenser!! And since I foolishly hit the cue ball into the pocket, it's your duty to kick my ass as hard as you can!! Now!!!!!!"

"Please stop trying to hide your embarrassment with intensity!! It's scary!! This is the first time anyone has stuck their ass out toward me so forcefully!!"

Part 3

And so those two idiots played their roles as supporting characters by moving secretly across a snowy plain of Alaska and carrying out demolitions work to stop the enemy convoy.

"This is the 5th spot," muttered Quenser on that snowy plain that had grown dark due to the sun having completely set. "The ' maze' is finally complete."

"Now the Information Alliance maintenance convoy can't move freely to and from the battlefield. The primary route is blocked by the wall of wreckage we created and the sharp fragments will destroy their tires if they try to find a way through. But we can still move through quickly because we know the proper route."

"This in itself does not actually work as an attack against the Rush. It'll all be a waste of time if our princess loses in a direct conflict."

"Not necessarily."

"?"

Quenser looked confused, and a cruel smile appeared on Heivia 's face.

"The Rush uses a special means of movement that uses both an air cushion and treads. It normally floats using the power of air, but it uses chainsaw-like treads to tear at the ground and give it bursts of high speed. Surely you knew that, right?"

"Well, yeah…"

"Unlike the princess whose Object floats at all times, the Rush does contact the ground at times." Heivia lightly waved his index finger. "That means it's possible the fragments of the destroyed Object could be sucked in by the treads, causing a malfunction."

Normal stones or concrete would be torn away by those treads powered by the massive energy of the giant reactor.

However, the obstacles this time were remnants and armor plates from a similarly monstrous Object. It was possible those could actually damage the monster's treads.

"But will it really go that well?" Quenser was somehow doubtful. "Objects have tons of sensors. They'll be able to detect the metal on the ground, right?"

"It's everywhere. Even if they can detect it, they might not be able to avoid it."

"If this would really work, wouldn't someone be putting serious effort into developing anti-Object caltrops?"

"The high heat resistance of the armor plates comes from the work of artisans. This isn't cheap stuff they can pump out like crazy. They've likely determined it's more efficient to focus it all on spare parts for Objects."

"You sure are optimistic, Heivia. Are you the type that wouldn't hesitate to buy a lucky pot if your beautiful commander confidently told you to?"

"Our large-breasted commander isn't the type of beauty that gives you a sense of peace."

"…Yeah, she's the type of commander that personally organizes a unit under her direct control to perform surprise checks for porn magazines in the barracks."

"About that! Why does she have to put only women in their 20s in that group!? If it was some middle-aged guy, it could all be resolved peacefully with an awkward smile!!"

"That's the entire point. By the way, how about we form an alliance, Heivia? When it looks like they'll be checking in one of our hiding spots, the other can hide the goods in their spot and vice versa."

"But she has complete control of the radio transmissions. She would hear any emergency transmissions we made."

"We can use metaphors or code words or something. Y'know, we can say 'I'm cornered over here' or something to denote the beginning of a coded conversation."

"It would be best if we didn't use the same metaphors for long. How about we switch them out between missions?"

The two worked out those plans together, but they did not forget that they were on a battlefield.

"It looks like we'll know just how effective our sabotage is soon." Heivia checked the time on his military watch. "The clash between the princess and the Rush should be beginning right about now."

"…In any normal place, only people working overtime would still be at work. I'd like to make it back in time for the last train."

Part 4

The Legitimacy Kingdom Object known as the Baby Magnum was designated a Composite Multi-Role Object.

However, the more common term used was "First Generation Object".

It was made to perform in all environments and weather conditions. If some parts were switched out, it could even move freely over the ocean. When First Generation Objects first appeared, they were said to be more powerful and easier to use than a nuclear weapon, but the situation had changed now that it was normal for world powers to possess powerful Objects.

【ベイビーマグナム】
BABY MAGNUM

全長…75メートル（主砲最大展開時）

最高速度…時速530キロ

装甲…2センチ×500層（溶接など不純物含む）

用途…戦場制圧用兵器

分類…総合マルチロール型（第一世代）

運用者…正統王国第37機動整備大隊

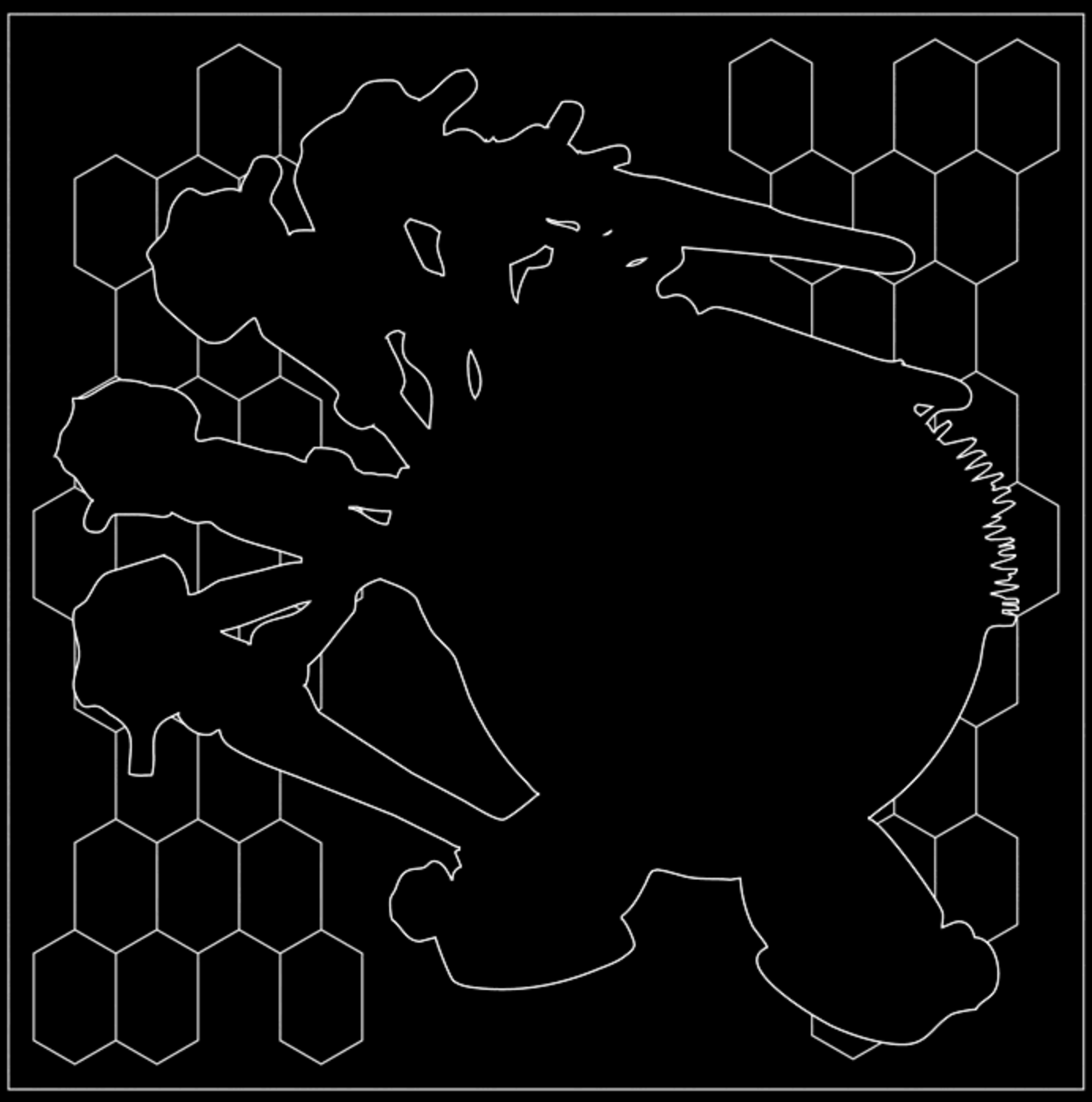
仕様…静電気＋レーザー型推進システム

主砲…回転アーム式兵装×7

副砲…レーザー、コイルガンなど

コードネーム…ベイビーマグナム

メインカラーリング…ホワイト



BABY MAGNUM

The main cannons supported by the seven arms extending from the back of the Object could rotate at the base like a revolver. This allowed it to fire different types and varieties of weapons to match the situation. When put that way, it sounded quite convenient and powerful.

However, the Elite pilot girl who piloted the Baby Magnum felt about it differently.

Her Object only had multiple options for its main cannons because it was necessary.

In other words, the designers had not been confident its main cannons could defeat an enemy in a single strike, so they had prepared that option as a form of insurance.

Her main cannons were weak.

The implications of this were as follows: In an age where Objects were common and there was a flood of Objects of equal or greater ability, a standard First Generation Object had no guarantee that it could destroy any and all enemies.

(I know that…)

The slender princess took a deep breath within the cockpit at the center of the Object. The air was purified with multiple filters and caustic soda, and the air pressure was maintained at the

perfect level for high-speed thought. That air almost mechanically swept away her negative thoughts and allowed her to bring her thoughts in order.

(Regardless, I can only pilot the Baby Magnum as it is what I was specially modified to pilot. I have no choice but to take on the world with the Baby Magnum.)

She focused her thoughts and looked back at the front monitor.

There was already a reading on the radar.

She had her enemy's location and her enemy surely had hers.

It was 1 on 1.

Single combat on the greatest scale ever seen in the world was about to begin.

Just as the princess felt a tense atmosphere fill the cockpit, she heard the electronic tone indicating an external transmission had come in.

It was not on an official Legitimacy Kingdom military frequency .

Objects tended to have the ability to pick up all transmission from frequencies not of their own army and attempt to analyze them. If they happened to learn of the enemy's movements from doing so, that was great. Due to complex codes, enemy transmissions were rarely intercepted, and when they were, they could always be false information meant to lead you into a trap.

This meant it was usually not too useful, but a Composite Multi-Role Object was filled with such "useless" features.

What the Baby Magnum had picked up was on neither a Legitimacy Kingdom military frequency nor an Information Alliance military frequency. It was pretty much a general frequency. It was also not coded so either side could understand it.

(Are they purposefully letting me hear this…?)

The princess gave a suspicious look.

The voice of a teenage girl came from the speaker.

"Oh ho ho. I don't believe I have seen you since Oceania, you unrefined Legitimacy Kingdom Elite."

"…"

The princess immediately cut off the transmission, but another transmission came over a different frequency almost immediately after that.

"I suppose I cannot blame you for trembling in fear, but do not worry. I am kind. Oh ho ho. I am of course generous enough to recognize your white flag. I am not like that Object that lies in pieces all around here."

"Must you insult me with every word you speak…?" A dangerous light appeared in the princess's expressionless eyes at the Information Alliance Elite's reference to her defeat to the Water Strider. "I will make sure we have no need of our white flag. I will

destroy you here. I will make you into a souvenir just like the Water Strider."

"My, my. Now, this is a problem. I cannot take my reward according to plan unless I make you use your white flag. Oh ho ho. "

"…?"

"After all, if you use your white flag, we can take prisoners from the surviving soldiers. Which means… Oh ho ho. I will have a chance to retrieve a certain gentleman from your unit and scout him for my own uses."

In the next instant, the princess fired one of the Baby Magnum's main cannons.

【ラッシュ】
RUSH

全長… 100メートル（主砲最大展開時）

最高速度… 時速530キロ

装甲… 5センチ×200層（カーボン、アミラド等を含む複合装甲）

用途… 対オブジェクト用駆逐兵器

分類… 陸戦特化型第二世代（エアクッションによる海上移動のみは可）

運用者… 情報同盟

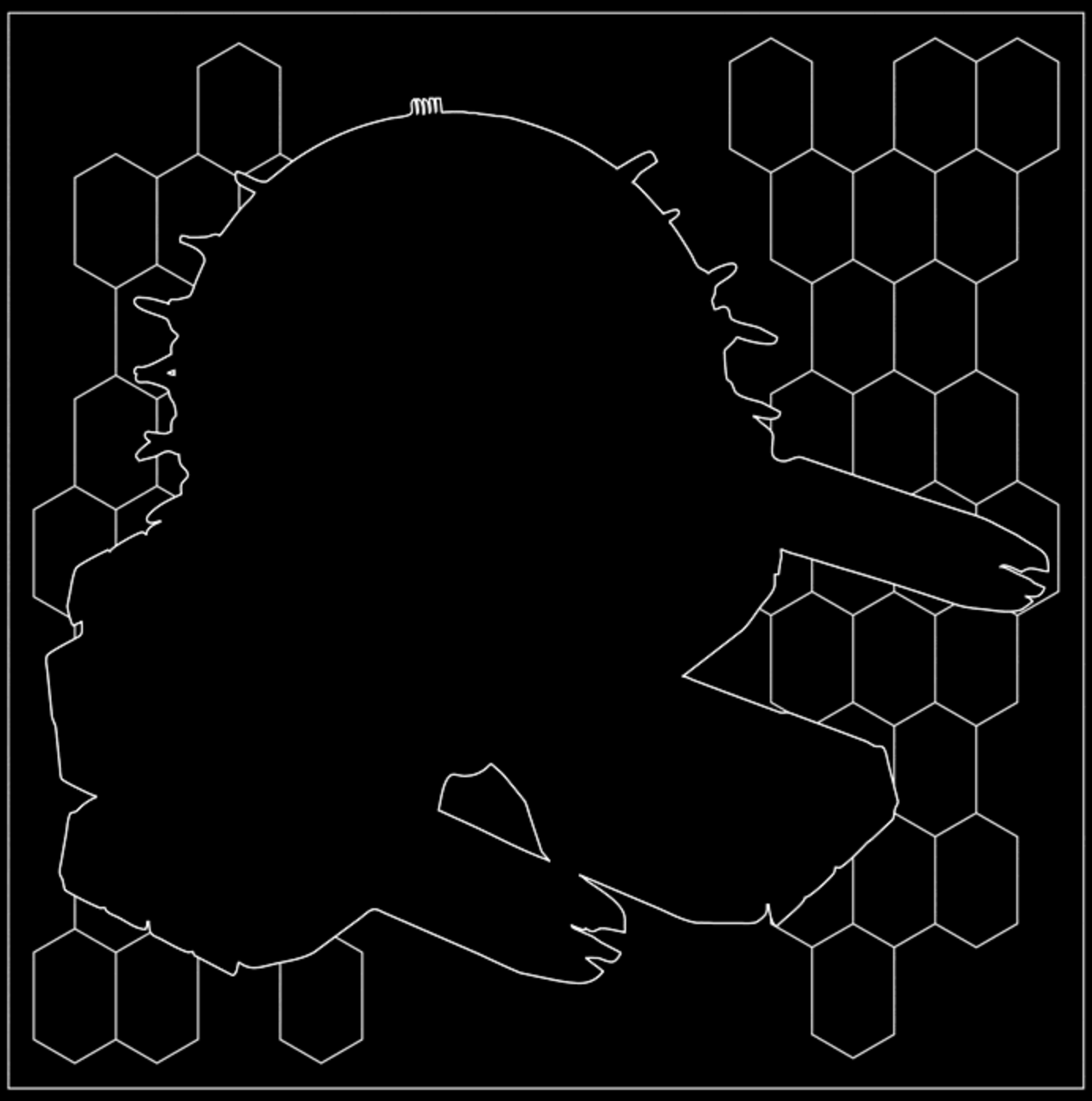
仕様… エアクッションフロート＋キャタピラ式推進システム

主砲… 連速ビーム式ガトリング砲×2

副砲… レールガン、コイルガンなど

コードネーム… ラッシュ（自国では『ガトリング033』）

メインカラーリング… グレー



RUSH

The coilgun fired a massive steel shell with the power of electromagnets, but the Information Alliance's Rush was out of range, so it did not receive so much as a scratch. However, the princess had achieved her objective.

That had been no warning shot.

It had been a signal to denote the beginning of the deadly battle.

As if in response to the shot, the giant Object before her quickly approached. It charged across the open snowy plain as if intentionally entering effective range of the Baby Magnum's weapons.

The princess also charged across the snowy plain while heading back and forth in an S-curve.

A simple word was filling her head.

"Die…!!"

"Oh ho ho! Oh ho ho ho ho ho!! Once I have that gentleman, I will put a collar and dog ears on him and give him the best of care, so do not worry! In fact, he would clearly be happier here than with your unrefined unit. Oh ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho!!"

With an overwhelming explosive noise that disturbed even the electromagnetic waves of their transmissions to each other, the two giant weapons fired their main cannons.

Part 5

Object versus Object.

A safe and clean battlefield.

That international competition was something like an official sports competition that cleanly distinguished between the battlefield and safe countries.

In this age, wars were deadly fights between those giant weapons, so no others needed to die in the wars. When one of the Objects was destroyed, the war was over. The only sacrifice was the Elite piloting the Object. And even that was not assured. If the Elite performed an emergency ejection and transmitted the signal known as the white flag, the enemy Object would end its pursuit and preparations would be made for an end of war conference between the two nations.

Dying on the battlefield was no longer common.

The most common reason for a soldier to leave a front lines base was not injuries or death. Instead, it was due to complications in a romantic relationship with someone else on the base.

New soldiers fresh out of boot camp would lose their edge on the front lines.

Or so it should have been…

"God dammit!! How in the hell is this a safe and clean battlefield!?" shouted Quenser and Heivia in unison as they ran full tilt across the snowy white plain.

They had been hiding about a kilometer from where the two Objects had begun to clash. From there, they had tried to use binoculars or rifle scope to watch the "sports competition", but the aftereffects of the battle spread to a frightening distance.

The cause of their fear was the shockwaves.

The main bodies of the Objects alone were over 50 meters across , so when they fired their main cannons, something like a tremor in the earth spread across the snowy white plain, causing the ground to push up at them from below. That had relentlessly shaken the 10-meter-long piece of Water Strider wreckage Quenser and Heivia were hiding behind, causing it to fall over so that it would crush them.

With the cover they were using as a shield trying to kill them, Quenser and Heivia were forced to run as fast as they could across the snowy plain. Given how massive the piece of wreckage was, it was just as dynamic a sight as seeing a slightly old car being turned into a hunk of recycled metal.

The Objects on the battlefield did not seem to notice the presence of the two boys. Or they had but were simply ignoring them because they could not affect the battle any.

The puny human crawling across the ground named Quenser did not want his grave to list such a pathetic cause of death, so he ran away looking like a demon covered in snow.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!! See, this is just as ridiculous as ever!! This is divine punishment for lowly people like us thinking we could watch an Object battle with our own eyes!!"

"Divine punishment!? Are you from the Faith Organization now!? Only shrine maidens talk about divine punishment!!"

"Divine punishment is a Shinto concept? I thought it was Buddhist."

After the wreckage fell over and knocked a cloud of white snow into the air like dust, Quenser and Heivia hid behind it once more. The shockwaves still blasted through intermittently, but the Object wreckage seemed to have fallen into a more stable position. It was the same as a fallen tree not moving after it loses to gravity the first time.

Heivia lay on his stomach behind the wreckage and kept his breathing shallow.

"…This is really pathetic. We're putting our lives in the hands of the wreckage that tried to kill us. It feels like getting in the bath the next day without letting out the water."

"If you worry about pride when up against an Object, you won't last 5 seconds," replied Quenser offhand as he checked on the battlefield with his binoculars.

Since it was 50 meter+ monsters fighting, the assistance of the lenses was pretty much unnecessary.

They were fighting at close range.

Despite their huge size, Objects could move at high speeds of 500 kph. And this was not simply in a straight trajectory. They could make slight evasive movements similar to the footwork of a mixed martial artist. Overall, they ended up moving in circles around each other.

They could not hide behind cover to avoid shells and they could not use chaff or flares to throw off the enemy's aim.

When a shell came flying toward them, they evaded it by sliding to the side.

They could actually predict when a cannon would fire from the minute movements it made, but the sight of shells being avoided like they were fists moving at tremendous speed was enough to leave a human speechless.

"…We should be thankful for the enemy's rapid fire," said Quenser quietly as he carefully watched the Information Alliance's Rush. "Its main cannons are rapid fire beam cannon Gatling guns. They were made into Gatling guns in order to extend how long

they could fire, but even then 30 seconds at a time is the limit. They probably put one on either side to make up for the time it takes to cool down."

If it could fire those Gatling guns without limit, the princess would not be able to escape with her quick movements. It would be no different from the enemy swinging around a giant saber. But with the time limit, the princess only had to flee at full speed in one direction during that time and then change directions once the rapid fire ended.

With both main cannons, the Rush could fire without break, but its giant form got in the way. Each cannon could rotate enough to cover 180 degrees. This meant the right main cannon could only target the right 180 degrees. If the princess escaped to the left side of the spherical main body, that cannon could not target her.

"It looks like the Information Alliance's 'Oh ho ho' is trying to make up for that by rotating the entire Object, but she isn't able to keep up with the princess's speed."

"Hey. Hey, Quenser. Listen to this." Heivia had been messing with the radio and now he held the rectangular device out toward Quenser. "I've picked up some kind of lover's quarrel."

"?"

Quenser frowned and focused on the voices coming from the radio.

What he heard was…

"Oh ho ho!! Just as I would expect of a loser like you, you are excellent at running away! End this pointless struggle and hand that gentleman over to my G-cup chest!!"

"He is here to perform maintenance on my Object. *My* Object!! He would be wasted on an Object as irregularly shaped as yours. You're not wanted here, so get lost. Or die."

The two Objects continued to fire their cannons at each other, but the two Elite's tone of voice was even more frightening.

Still holding out the radio, Heivia said, "This is no joke. I bet that large-breasted commander of ours has her head in her hands right about now."

"Hey, Heivia. What is this about?"

"Weren't you listening? It's pretty obvious. Does this really sound like some high level code to you?"

"Two Elites from different sides using a war to fight over a single maintenance soldier? That's one hell of a story. How much engineering skill does this guy have? Does he have proprietary tools only he can use or something?"

Without speaking a word and still smiling, Heivia clenched his right fist and punched his partner in the face.

Lying in the snow and holding his nose, Quenser was about to cry out in protest, but the voice never came.

A major change came over the battle.

A remarkably loud explosion rang out.

The two Objects had fired their main cannons and hit their opponent.

"They hit each other!!" shouted Heivia.

"How's the princess!?" shouted Quenser.

It seemed both Elites had decided it would be a long battle and had therefore targeted their opponent's main cannons.

The princess's Baby Magnum had blown one of the Rush's main cannons clean off. Its main cannons rotated to cover the 180 degrees on either side. With one of those gone, one side was a complete safe area.

And as for the princess's Baby Magnum…

"Hey, this is bad." Heivia gulped as he looked through his rifle scope that provided more magnification than Quenser's binoculars . "The Baby Magnum had the 'base' taken out!! The back of the body where the joints for the 7 main cannon arms are gathered was blown off!!"

"The joints? But that could keep all of the arms from moving!"

"She focused too much on taking out that 'Oh ho ho's' main cannon while circling around the Rush. Otherwise, she would never have been hit in the back in a 1 on 1 fight!!"

The two Objects continued in slow circles around each other, but the bombardment had ended.

The shouting voices over the radio had ended as well.

Silence.

Quiet.

The princess's back joints had been shot off, but it was unclear if all of the 7 main cannons were unusable or if some of them were just barely functioning.

It was just as unclear how well the Information Alliance's Rush could continue fighting with only one of its main cannons.

They were both trying to assess the battle ability of their opponent.

Quenser felt a great tension cover the battlefield.

If either of them decided they had a way to attack, the battle would be over in an instant. However, that decision might not be correct. If they tried, they could fail. If they failed, the battle would end with their opponent taking advantage of that failure and taking them out.

The Elites piloting the Objects were likely using their respective Object's auto diagnostics to their fullest to determine just how usable their Object was. And all the while, they would be repeating strategy simulations in their heads dozens or even hundreds of times.

(…What are they going to do?)

Quenser had never known that a motionless battlefield could be so oppressive. He felt a pressure over his entire body like he was on a submarine sinking into the dark depths of the ocean after an engine failure.

And…

After about 500 seconds, the slow circular motion stopped completely.

With its main cannons pointed at the Information Alliance's Rush, the princess's Baby Magnum slowly moved backwards. She was headed away from the snowy plain of the battlefield and to her maintenance base zone.

The Information Alliance's "Oh ho ho" did not try to head after her.

As if in response, the Rush backed away from the snowy plain as well.

Once it began, it all sped up.

After they had moved about 500 meters each, the two Objects suddenly rotated 180 degrees and left at full speed.

Quenser and Heivia were left alone on the battlefield.

"Wh-what was that? What happened?"

"They're going in for a pit stop." Heivia got up off the snow. "Only another Object's main cannon can penetrate the thick armor

of an Object. Both of them had their main cannons taken out. Without a way to finish this, there was no point in continuing. They need to have maintenance performed as quickly as possible so they can attack before the other's maintenance is complete."

"But the Rush still had one of its main cannons."

"Didn't you see the layout of the Rush's main cannons, battlefield student? It had one on either side. With one destroyed, it has a major blind spot. That was hardly an ideal situation for the Rush. She probably wanted to head back for maintenance if possible."

As previously stated, the princess's back joints for the seven arms of the seven main cannons had been damaged. The cannons themselves had not been destroyed, so it was possible they could still be fired. The Rush had wanted something certain, so it had not headed after her.

Naturally, the one that finished its pit stop first would win.

"That means…" Quenser felt an unpleasant pressure in his gut. "This is bad. The princess had the part on the back that collects the joints for the 7 main cannon arms destroyed. That's like a human hand. All the joints in there make it a delicate area. Can they swap that out quickly?"

"And the Information Alliance just has to put in a whole main cannon. Even a monkey would be able to tell who will likely finish changing first." Despite his words, Heivia did not look all that frightened. "Hey, Quenser. Why do you think we drilled holes in

that cliff and stuffed bombs inside? It was to get in the way of their maintenance unit."

"Oh, that's right," said Quenser as if he had only just remembered.

The flashy battle between Objects had made him completely forget.

They had originally been trying to block the path for the maintenance convoy.

Heivia shrugged and said, "The Information Alliance's highhanded girl and her followers will be caught in our obstacle course. If the princess can finish changing in the time that we manage to buy, we win."

"But what are we supposed to do? Head back to the base as quickly as we can and help with the maintenance? They'll need all the help they can get."

"You idiot. I said it was a pit stop, remember? If it isn't done by the time we make it back to the base, the Information Alliance will finish first no matter how much time we buy. Even if we rush back to the base at full speed, the princess's maintenance will be over already."

"Then what *are* we supposed to do? That leaves us with nothing ."

"Are you trying to be an overachiever now? There's no rule saying we have to always be doing some kind of work. If there's nothing for us to do, we just need to head back at a nice leisurely pace. In fact, if we rush back, that giant-breasted commander would probably just force some odd jobs on us."

"Really…?"

"Really. What, did you get all excited seeing Objects so close? The presence of two puny soldiers makes no difference, so why bother gathering your strength? Froleytia and the others rely on us too much. A battle between Objects is just on too great a scale for humans with nothing but their two hands to deal with."

"True," agreed Quenser.

In what seemed like some kind of cruel punishment on a global scale, Quenser had been forced to face Objects himself due to various unpleasant coincidences, but wars that did not require his involvement should have been in the vast majority.

There was no reason for them to go all out here.

For one thing, they had properly carried out the demolition work on the cliff as Froleytia had ordered.

They had carried out their role, so there was no need to carry out any free overtime.

The Information Alliance military would get caught in the Alaskan obstacle course as planned, so the maintenance on the

princess would have time to finish. After that, she could destroy the Second Generation Rush.

After thinking through all that, the tension finally left Quenser's shoulders.

"…Then let's take our time heading back."

"Yes, yes. That's our general stance. Did you finally remember? How about we try to find a deer or bear to shoot on the way back? Despite all my complaints about those flavorless rations, they would probably work as bait if we cut them up and scattered them over the ground."

"If we have time, I would rather see if I can analyze any of the technology in the Water Strider. There's educational material just scattered over this entire area."

"You're still digging for scraps? You're quite the enthusiastic student."

"When it leads to making a fortune, anyone would get serious about it."

"But the Legitimacy Kingdom military has already analyzed it all to a certain extent. Isn't there even a design in the database?"

"That's just an estimation based on the pieces we have. There might be some technology they overlooked. Really, I see more value in digging through this mountain of treasure than this pointless war."

As they chatted, the two started walking across the snow, but then Froleytia contacted them via radio.

"Quenser, Heivia!! Are you still at Point 199ASD!? I'm checking via satellite, so don't try to lie. This is an emergency, so I have no time for stupid jokes!!"

"Froleytia?"

"I don't feel like explaining it all, so just check the satellite image via handheld device and listen." The impatience was clearly evident in Froleytia's voice. As she spoke, Quenser frantically pulled out his handheld device. "I'll get straight to the point. The Information Alliance's Second Generation Rush has not returned to the maintenance base 50 kilometers to the north. They have deployed a different convoy from nearby. If the work to swap out its main cannon begins like this, it will likely finish before the princess's maintenance is done!!"

"Wait, wait, wait!!" cut in Heivia from the side. "Isn't that what we blew up those cliffs to stop!? I thought the convoy couldn't reach the battlefield because of the Water Strider wreckage in the way!?"

"The convoy couldn't," replied Froleytia.

Quenser finally managed to call up the satellite image and he grimaced when he realized what she meant.

"…Look, Heivia. They carried it on foot."

"Hahh!? What's that supposed to mean!? How many tons do you think an Object's main cannon weighs!?"

"The Information Alliance has worked to make the raw materials as light as possible, so about 100 tons I would think. But that uses 5 rapid fire beam cannons, so each individual one would be about 20 tons. They broke each one apart into over 100 pieces and are carrying those pieces!! That's 200 kilograms a person! Just five trips between the stopped vehicles and the work area would be enough!!"

"200…There's no way they can walk around on this snowy plain while carrying that much!!"

"Normally, no. But the Information Alliance has a powered suit unit. The normal limits of the human body do not apply here," Froleytia replied to Heivia's complaint. "The walls of wreckage that keeps the large vehicles from getting through have big enough openings for people to walk through! They have headed through those openings to meet up with the Rush!!"

"This is bad…" Heivia audibly gulped. "This is really bad!! This is no joke! Even with the time it takes to disassemble and assemble the Rush's main cannon, we're at the disadvantage here. If they finish their pit stop, the princess will be destroyed without being able to fight back!!"

"That's right, Heivia. It's possible the Rush's main cannons were designed to be easily disassembled so that they could be

transported by air. That's why I need you two to stop the Rush's maintenance in any way possible!! The expected rendezvous point for the enemy is 2 kilometers north of you! You're closest!!"

"You're crazy," muttered Heivia as he trembled at the invitation to a deadly battle he had just been given. "I saw their powered suits in that Oceanian military nation, and those aren't things you can take care of with a rifle!! And even if it needs maintenance, that Second Generation Object is still functioning!! It still has one main cannon, not to mention the almost 100 smaller cannons all over it!! If we get close, we'll just be blown to pieces!"

"If we had another option, we would not be relying on problem soldiers like you two." Froleytia sounded annoyed and she was likely holding her head in her hands. "At this rate, Alaska will be transformed into a nightmarish battlefield once more. If you're okay with that, then you can just hide behind that Water Strider wreckage, Heivia. Think up a way of slowing them down on your own," was all Froleytia added before ending the transmission.

Heivia almost threw the radio to the ground, but the ecological side of his mind just barely won out over that urge.

Looking like he was about to cry, Heivia spoke to the student who stood next to him.

"This is really no joke. They say a request from a beauty is another name for a one way ticket to hell!! What are we going to do, Quenser!?"

"Isn't it obvious?" said Quenser as he stared at his handheld device.

The old movement patterns from the Rush's battles in the Oceanian military nation were recorded in the Legitimacy Kingdom database. He was checking those.

"We need to think of a way to deal with this. Otherwise, the princess will be the first one to be taken out."

"Wait, I thought the obvious solution was to ignore our orders and run away! Wait a second, Quenser!! Dammit, you really are a knight in shining armor, you know that!? You're wasted as a commoner!!" shouted back Heivia as he chased after Quenser who had started to run.

Quenser was headed for the wreckage of one of the Water Strider's main cannons. The wreckage looked like a metal pylon forcibly bent into a V shape. It had ripped open like an empty can right in the middle of the bend.

The rip was over 70 cm across. A human could probably walk inside without even crouching.

Quenser slid his body inside the crack, but did not go all the way inside. He was checking on the edge of the "wall" as seen from within the crack.

Flat cylindrical objects with a 20 cm diameter and 10 cm thickness were stuffed inside. They were likely installed from one end of the tunnel-like main cannon to the other.

As Quenser inspected the edge, Heivia asked a question with an expression of regret.

"Hey, Sir Knight. Is this any time to be looting? What are you looking for anyway?"

"Electromagnets," replied Quenser bluntly. "The Water Strider's main cannons were low-stability plasma cannons. After the special gas was turned into plasma, it was sent in the proper direction using a large number of electromagnets installed within the barrel."

"Did you look up the destroyed Object's design, battlefield student?"

"That much is just general knowledge," said Quenser as he continued his work with both hands.

He took the parts for the large electric drill he had for drilling into the cliff wall and removed them from their bag. He then removed the cylindrical electromagnets from the edge of the rip in the main cannon and put them into the empty bag. After finishing, he grabbed just the battery from the electric drill's parts.

"What are you going to do with those electromagnets?"

"Attach them to metal of course. You know what Objects are primarily made of, right?" After leaving the crack in the main cannon, Quenser tapped the side of the cannon with the back of his hand. "Steel mixed with high heat resistant materials."

"Are you serious? Are you saying you're going to go rock climbing on that giant monster!?"

"Look."

Without answering the question, Quenser held his handheld device out toward Heivia's face.

It was displaying the satellite image.

"Froleytia seemed pretty impatient, but we probably have a bit more time. They can't head straight for the area 2 kilometers north of here. That's where the Water Strider wreckage is thickest. Even if the powered suit unit can get over it, there is too much wreckage around for them to have enough space to carry out the assembly process. They'll have to head back and take a bit of a detour. … That means the Rush can't just head away from here in a straight line. While they're circling around, we'll have a chance where the Rush draws closer to us. We might be able to do something."

"You mean because the wall of Object wreckage can't be blown away with normal explosives?" asked Heivia in annoyance. "Did you forget, Quenser? The Rush still has one of its main cannons left! That thing can destroy a brand new Object, so that wreckage will be no problem for it!!"

"If it just had to destroy it, yes." Quenser's expression did not change. "But the Rush's main cannon is a rapid fire beam cannon Gatling gun. The armor it fires at melts from the heat. Even if they're wearing a powered suit, do you think a person can just walk through those blast furnace-like conditions? Also, the outside of the main cannon may be resistant to shocks, but the inner portions they'll also be carrying are filled with sensitive equipment."

"Even if the Rush takes this detour," said Heivia who seemed completely flustered. "We'll still be in danger. Whether it's the powered suits that 5.56mm bullets won't work on or the Second Generation Object with 100 cannons covering every direction, it would be suicide for just the two of us to try to fight them."

"Sorry, but I don't have time to argue. …Look at this image, Heivia. The Rush will be here in less than 3 minutes!! It'll be passing by less than 50 meters from here!!"

"To hell with that!! If there's no time, then just explain yourself! I'm running away otherwise!!"

Heivia was ready to run away regardless of shame or honor, but Quenser grabbed his shoulder. Heivia seriously considered knocking him down by force, but Quenser spoke before he could do so.

"Please help me, Heivia."

"No, thank you! I only take sadistic orders from women!! I'm not going down to hell with you!!"

"You can't escape regardless. If the unit is wiped out, the Information Alliance will use all of its forces to do a sweep of the area. And even if you slip through the gaps in their search, the Legitimacy Kingdom will not rescue you. You will just end up freezing to death before spring."

"…!!"

"And don't think you'll be rescued if they take you prisoner. I'm just a commoner, but you're a noble. The brunt of their cruelty will be aimed at you rather than me. And having to pay a ransom for you would bring shame to your family, so you would never inherit it after that."

"Are you serious…? Then what am I supposed to do!?"

"Help me, Heivia," said Quenser again. "We have no time."

Part 6

The Second Generation Object known as the Rush by the Legitimacy Kingdom was named the Gatling 033 by the Information Alliance. The Elite girl sat in its cockpit. As Quenser had predicted, she had no choice but to take a detour.

The battle with the Legitimacy Kingdom Object would be determined by how quickly the maintenance on her main cannon could be completed. Once it was, the battle would effectively be over.

However, the Elite girl was not piloting the Object at full speed.

In fact, she had lowered her speed to move along very, very cautiously.

The Gatling 033 used an air cushion engine that used the power of the air and special treads for high speed movement. She doubted the scattered Object wreckage could damage the treads, but in the off chance that they did, she would lose even more time with the extra maintenance. She was afraid of losing her time advantage.

(Objects can withstand nuclear attacks, so I doubt it would be damaged so easily, but that is why completely unpredictable "acts of god" are so frightening. Oh ho ho.)

Those who let their guard down when they had a single safe strategy could not hope to defeat what were known as " coincidences".

The outcome of entire wars rested on the shoulders of an Elite, so the girl felt it was necessary to pay close attention even after putting together a safe strategy.

Luckily, her maintenance was simple enough that she would likely still have time to finish her maintenance and attack the Legitimacy Kingdom Object even while taking such a cautious detour.

A few different means of hindering the convoy had been set up, but the powered suit unit had taken action to keep them from losing any time.

However, she could not allow herself to get too worked up.

It was important to keep a level head.

If she became impatient and moved at full speed to preserve that safe strategy, it could bring about unnecessary trouble that would bring that safe strategy crashing down. Even if she was just barely staying on the proper side of the limit, she had to accurately move the Object like she was a machine as well. That was the way to ensure victory.

Suddenly, the Gatling 033's sensors picked up infrared rays.

It was the type that guided weapons used to aim.

(…My, my.)

The white smoke of something being launched came from atop a cliff to her side…but the cliff only came up to about half the height of the Gatling 033. It was a portable anti-tank missile, a weapon that was not really useful on a modern battlefield.

(If this is all they can do to slow me down, then these "acts of god" are surprisingly cute. Oh ho ho.)

It happened immediately after it was fired.

It was no more than 0.3 seconds later.

The smallest of the Gatling 033's weapons reacted. A metal railgun shell was fired at a speed greater than Mach 5. The missile that had only just left the barrel was shot down and an area 10

meters around where it had been fired was blown away. The impact held such great power that it blew away even the flames of the missile.

A dull rumble shook the snowy earth.

Paying it no heed, the Elite girl informed her fellow soldiers.

"Oh ho ho. This is the Gatling 033. Someone who is likely from the Legitimacy Kingdom attacked me in the middle of my detour." She sounded utterly bored. "No, that will not be necessary. There is unlikely to be even a body left. It would be a waste of time to investigate. Oh ho ho."

Part 7

Heivia hid behind some rocks a bit away.

He had attached a portable anti-tank missile launcher to some Water Strider wreckage, connected a cable to it, and had fired it remotely. The Rush's railgun had fired on an area well away from where Heivia was.

But his body was still covered in sweat.

If the Rush realized what Heivia was trying to do, he would have been shot without hesitation.

"…God dammit. I can't tell if going along with him is bringing me towards victory or death."

Quenser was not currently with Heivia.

He of course had not been blown away with the anti-tank missile.

Heivia slowly left the rocks, got down on his belly, and used his rifle scope to check around the area.

Quenser had run between pieces of Water Strider wreckage to travel across the cliff. The Information Alliance's Rush had various sensors, so the odds were good he would be spotted if he simply hid. The reason Quenser had not been shot was…

(Because it's Object wreckage, hm?)

Heivia himself was hiding behind a piece of thick armor plating .

Object armor was incredibly thick and it would reflect radar and most other types of sensors. Also, Quenser was currently using a piece of anti-nuclear weapon lead plating as a shield. Quenser could not have been located even with X-rays.

(Also, the shockwave from that blast affected the surrounding snow and the smaller pieces of armor. Someone running around in white camouflage might be overlooked as long as the sensors don't pick up on an abnormality.)

The Rush was currently moving through a ravine.

The Object was slowly moving along such that it was almost rubbing up against the cliff face

And…

Quenser jumped from the cliff.

Just before he jumped, he threw a plastic explosive off the cliff and detonated it. A great amount of dirt and snow cut off the Rush 's information from its cameras, microphones, heat sensors, and other sensors. Since the Object barely fit inside the ravine, the Elite would likely either think the vibration of the Object had caused a landslide or a bomb had been detonated remotely in an attempt to block the Object's path.

The Rush was made up of the spherical main body with the † shaped float and the treads located directly below that. The floats extended to the front, back, left, and right. The two to the left and the right each had a rapid fire beam cannon Gatling gun installed on the top of the end.

Quenser had landed on one of those.

Even if the Rush had slowed down to make it through the ravine, it was still moving. When Quenser landed, he could not stop his momentum, and his feet slipped.

(Waaahhh!? Damn. The past movement patterns I checked on my handheld device were no use whatsoever!!)

He then slipped down off the main cannon.

He landed on his butt atop the Rush's float.

(…Come to think of it, I rode on here in Oceania, didn't I?)

He looked up.

The Object had over 100 cannons both large and small, but it did not have all that many on the side. They likely wanted to give priority to giving the main cannon room.

However, it did have almost 20 smaller cannons.

Quenser attached a rope to an electromagnet and then wrapped a battery cable around the rope. He plugged the power cable into the jack on the front of the electromagnet and bluish-white sparks flew from it. He lightly swung the rope around to build up centrifugal force. After gaining momentum, he threw the electromagnet straight up. The mass attached at a point near the base of a small cannon.

The Rush's armor plates used carbon and aramid, but the electromagnet succeeded in attaching.

(Now then. This is like having something stuck to your face. Even all those sensors are of no use at this close range. That's the problem with being so large.)

Quenser grabbed the rope with both hands and began climbing up. In all honesty, that was the hardest part. He was wearing thick gloves, but a stinging, scraping pain covered his palms in no time.

It felt like forever before he made it all the way up.

While making sure to avoid being seen by the aiming camera located just below the barrel, he sat down on top of the cannon. It was similar to taking a quick rest on a short outcropping while rock climbing. However, his goal was still quite distant.

He was only about 20 meters up.

Quenser pulled an additional electromagnet and rope out of the large bag, but then he heard Heivia over his radio.

"You really just run all over the place with a confident grin on your face, don't you? If the Rush had magnetic sensors, you would have been noticed the second you used the first electromagnet."

"That was no coincidence," said Quenser as he started to move slowly toward the spherical main body at the base of the cannon. Moving across the cylindrical cannon took more care than he had expected. "I rode on the Rush's float in that Oceanian military nation, remember? I noticed it had no magnetic sensors on the main body then. I also noticed that the aiming cameras for the cannons were located on the underside, leaving the top side defenseless."

"Oh, god. Wouldn't it be faster if you just got the Object design from her in bed?" joked Heivia, but Quenser ignored him and looked up at the giant Object.

Just the main body was 50 meters across, so he still had plenty to look up at.

"It's just like how you can't see something stuck to your face with your own eyes. The Elite won't notice that I'm rock climbing."

Part 8

Quenser removed the rope from the electromagnet attached to the side of the armor.

However, he was more than halfway down the spherical main body, so the wall was slanted more than 90 degrees. It was jutting out towards Quenser. An expert free climber may have managed easily, but a complete amateur like Quenser would have a hard time climbing up even with the help of the rope. It would have been easier if he was climbing straight up with the rope hanging down vertically.

However, he could hardly head back now.

He was over 20 meters from the ground. Even with snow on the ground, he would not fare well with a drop from that height. Meanwhile, the Object was picking up speed. It must have left the narrowest part of the ravine. With the Water Strider wreckage buried under the snow, jumping to the ground would be suicide.

(Both heading up and heading down leads to hell. I should really get paid overtime for this.)

While crouched down atop the small cannon, Quenser looked around to check on his climbing route.

"Quenser," said Heivia from the radio tucked into Quenser's uniform. "I get that you're climbing up, but where exactly are you headed?"

"Dunno. But I need to find something I can use to slow down their maintenance! I could destroy the radar or the auxiliary sensors, or I could do something to the cockpit barriers to force them to open! After I get up, I need to find a way to buy us some time!!"

"We're running out of time. If you don't hurry, you'll be taken along with the Rush to the Information Alliance's impromptu maintenance area!! If that happens, it'll be hard for me to provide a diversion while you escape!"

Hearing that, Quenser pulled a new electromagnet from the bag .

The electromagnet could be used as a powerful handhold, but it was useless in its current state.

Still on the cannon, Quenser connected the thick cable into the jack on the electromagnet.

Bluish-white sparks flew.

He forced himself not to flinch and threw the electromagnet a few meters up onto the Rush's body.

With a solid click, a new contact point was created on the flat armor of the spherical body.

(The pilot can't see a soldier attached to the surface from within the cockpit. But I have to make sure not to pass in front of one of the cannon's cameras. The cameras are set below the cannons. I have to pass the rope around and get my feet on the cannon from above.)

"Quenser, not good!!" shouted Heivia in a sharp voice.

For an instant, Quenser did not know what Heivia meant, but he soon figured it out.

Over 200 cannons both large and small were installed on the Rush's surface.

Those cannons were making small, ordered movements like a crowd in a stadium doing the wave. That flow was headed his way like a grassy field blowing in the wind.

(There must have been a slight error in the cannon's movement, so it's checking to see if anything is hanging from any of them or on top of any of them!!)

Quenser took his feet from the cannon he was standing on and hung from the rope with both arms.

Immediately afterwards, the wave of the cannons passed right below him.

He had managed to get through it.

But then Quenser felt an unpleasant jerking sensation reach his arms.

(The electromagnet…!?)

He had only one battery, but he had multiple electromagnets. The more electromagnets he used, the less power would be left in the battery. And that would lower the power with which the electromagnets clung to the armor.

He could tell the electromagnet attached to the armor surface was slowly sliding down. Quenser frantically got a better grip on the rope and tried to climb up as much as he could.

Luckily, he was almost at the center of the sphere.

The slope was greater than 90 degrees there, but once he got past the halfway point, the slope would work in his favor. Then, he would just be heading up a slope.

(Don't fall…)

If he had received proper training like Heivia, he might have learned how to support his weight by grabbing the rope with his feet. However, Quenser did not know how to do that. He frantically climbed up using almost entirely his arms.

(Please, don't let me fall here!!)

Quenser finally made it up the rope and grabbed the electromagnet itself.

He pulled himself up onto the upper portion of the sphere.

He just had an upwards slope left.

(Now I can make it…)

Quenser's heavy breathing showed white in the cold air.

The effects would be even weaker, but he used an additional electromagnet to create another handhold. However, it no longer had to support his entire weight. He just needed something to help him with the steep slope, so he would be putting less of a burden on it. It would most likely be no problem.

"Heivia. Can you hear me, Heivia?"

He tried to contact the other boy over the radio, but he got no response.

He must have moved out of range. The Object was headed to the nearby site where the Information Alliance powered suit unit would replace the main cannon, but he had still ended up quite far away.

Quenser's mind turned to the plastic explosives in the bag on his back.

(Now, what do I target? I'm not trying to blow up the Object this time. Where can I damage it to slow down the maintenance the most?)

He was not even sure if the bombs he had were enough to destroy any part of it. An Object was a monstrous weapon that could withstand a nuclear strike. Its sensors and radar would

likely be destroyed in a nuclear strike, but that did not mean the Hand Axe plastic explosive would be enough.

(Trying to destroy something from the outside will be difficult. This isn't something for a flesh-and-blood soldier to attempt. Which means…)

Quenser came up with a new plan.

If he was going to do something, this idea was his only option.

But he did not have time to slowly check that his plan would work. The Object he stood on took another new action.

Specifically, the cannons did.

The lenses of the cameras attached to them all made a slight whirring noise in unison.

That meant…

(Not good.)

Quenser's throat grew dry.

(A simultaneous firing!?)

Part 9

Inside the cockpit of the Information Alliance's Second Generation Object, the Gatling 033, the pilot Elite's fingertips moved complexly.

Multiple windows opened on the large window, but she did not see any suspicious shadows at the moment. She was using the sensors too, but for an Object, "close range" was a few hundred meters out. An enemy that was truly close by was unlikely to show up.

There was a simple reason that she was suspicious of something being there.

"Some kind of electromagnetic signal was transmitting from close to the Gatling 033's surface. Oh ho ho."

The Elite girl had carried out the check due to a warning that appeared in a small window. She had confirmed that some kind of signal was being sent and received, but she unfortunately could not determine what kind of information it was.

There might have been someone there.

Or it might have been something unmanned.

(Oh ho ho. I moved all the cannons, so I know whatever it is is not using a cannon as a foothold.)

Due to that, the Elite girl decided that it was most likely unmanned. The radio signal might have been coming from a transmitter that would help the enemy Object aim.

The Elite moved her fingertips and sent signals to every one of the Gatling 033's cannons.

(How about I carry out one more countermeasure to be absolutely sure? Oh ho ho.)

She was performing a simultaneous firing.

She would fire the over 100 cannons both large and small installed on the Gatling 033 all at once.

She did not have to worry about aiming.

What mattered was that she fired them.

(Oh ho ho. Strictly speaking, it is the shockwaves and radiant heat that accompanies the firing that will swat away any annoying bugs.)

Railguns, coilguns, laser beams, and low-stability plasma cannons.

Each of the cannons produced massive side effects when fired. Object cannons could not be placed around bases because those side effects were so great they would likely affect those in the base.

If someone was clinging to the Object or some small device was attached, the Gatling 033's simultaneous firing would send shockwaves and radiant heat across the entirety of the armor.

Whether it was a person or an unmanned device sending the radio signal, they or it would be knocked off.

"Hm."

The Elite accessed the recorder box and called up information from the countless cameras and sensors installed on the Object. She was checking the time when she had passed through the narrowest portion of the ravine.

The camera showed only a blurred shadow, but the heat sensor had picked something up. But…

(Well, either way...)

The Elite coldheartedly hit a key with her index finger.

(Mercy to those who bow down before me and none for those who oppose me. That is the standard for those who operate Objects. Oh ho ho.)

Immediately afterwards, every single cannon fired mercilessly.

Massive shockwaves and radiant heat covered the entirety of the Object's armor.

After confirming that the radio signal had disappeared, the Elite girl happily piloted the Gatling 033 on further.

Part 10

The shockwave had been powerful enough to knock a human unconscious.

The radiant heat had been hot enough to burn both skin and military uniform black.

With it covering the entire spherical body of the Object, there should have been nowhere to flee.

That is, Quenser should have had nowhere to flee.

However…

There was one exception.

The area where the Rush's auxiliary sensors were gathered.

The Object's cannons did indeed produce massive shockwaves and radiant heat. However, they were made so that the side effects the Object produced did not destroy its own sensors and radar.

In other words, the arrangement and density of the cannons was designed to ensure the delicate radar and sensors were not affected by those side effects.

Quenser had immediately crawled into there.

(Before, the princess and the old lady got really mad at me for carelessly getting too close to the Baby Magnum's sensors. However, these sensors are only for support, so it can apparently continue fighting without them.)

Approaching the sensitive sensors increased the risk of being noticed by the Elite. However, luck had been with Quenser in his actions. Since the Object did nothing more, the Elite must have decided the intruder had fallen off from the simultaneous firing or none had been there in the first place.

(…Oh, shit. Did she notice this?)

Quenser looked down at the radio he had turned off and wiped away sweat that had started to freeze like sherbet. When he breathed out, it was visibly white.

(…This is where it truly begins.)

He pulled a clay-like bomb out of the bag on his back.

Even in that area filled with the most delicate sensors, he was surrounded by thick pillars, so it seemed it would be difficult to blow them away with bombs.

(I guess that's my only option.)

Quenser had an idea, but it would require a bit of luck.

An attack on that place was not something he could do on his own.

However, an attack there would have much greater results.

(I can't just go with a safe plan.)

As he thought, Quenser kneaded the clay-like plastic explosive in his hand.

(Standing up to a monstrous weapon like this is nothing but risks from the very beginning.)

Part 11

The Information Alliance's Second Generation Object, the Gatling 033, slowly came to a stop on a snowy plain.

It had not run into some kind of mechanical trouble.

It had reached the rendezvous point with the powered suit unit. The foot soldiers had gathered the parts to the disassembled rapid fire beam cannon Gatling gun. They just had to reassemble it and switch it out with the destroyed one. Then the Gatling 033 could attack the enemy Legitimacy Kingdom Object and the maintenance base zone it was within.

The Elite used her communications device to contact a maintenance soldier wearing a powered suit.

"Juliet is confirmed to be shut off. We will now replace the main cannon," said the maintenance soldier.

"Please keep this pit stop short. Oh ho ho. I have a plan laid out, so do not make it meaningless by wasting time."

In battles between two Objects, it was generally considered " bad manners" for an Object to attack a maintenance base zone. (This was not a strict rule, so there was no real need to follow it, however.) But if an enemy Object holed up in its maintenance base zone and refused to come out to the battlefield, the other Object had no choice but to destroy the Object, base and all.

On that pretext, a maintenance base zone could be attacked.

(…Oh ho ho. If it comes to that, there is a chance I will lose that gentleman.)

The Elite sank deeply into her seat, grabbed a small oxygen inhalation spray located to her side, and tried to recover some of the stamina she had lost in the high-G battle.

(But I have no other choice if it comes to that. I would like to make him mine, but it is not worth risking my life over. Oh ho ho.)

The main cannon replacement would be done before long.

She called up images recorded from the battle. The damage to the enemy Object had been in a more serious area. No matter how skilled their maintenance soldiers were, it was unlikely they could make up for the time delay it would cause.

(I can win this.)

The Elite used the spray to suck in more compressed oxygen and gave a thin smile.

Improvised autosuggestion was one means an Elite had to regulate her own condition.

(Oh ho ho. This is not just my power. It is me, my unit, and the Gatling 033. Every one of those is superior to the enemy's. I will not be destroyed so easily. They cannot turn this around now. That is why I can win this. I *will* win this.)

Suddenly, a red warning window appeared.

The Elite looked at it in suspicion. Some odd measurement errors had occurred in the targeting sensors.

(…Oh ho ho. I do not like this. It is like a prickling feeling in the back of my mind.)

To anyone else, they may have seemed like minor errors. She could easily fight with them. However, they were difficult measurement errors to deal with for an Elite who viewed the Object like an extension of her own body.

She moved her slender fingers to perform a few adjustments, but they did not correct the measurement errors.

It was not a software issue.

There was something physically wrong with the sensors themselves.

"Maintenance soldiers! Recheck sensors A through E!! They have measurement errors from 0.5 to 0.7. Oh ho ho. If it requires manual work, I will come out too!!"

"That will vastly slow down our work," said a maintenance soldier who was not sure what to say to the sudden request. "0.5 to 0.7 is within acceptable ranges. After the main cannon has been replaced, you need to immediately head out to engage the Legitimacy Kingdom Object! We do not have time!!"

"Do not be foolish!! Oh ho ho. It is because I will be up against an Object that I cannot allow even the slightest error!!"

"We really do not have time! The current strategy did not take into account any replacements other than the main cannon!! Lieutenant Colonel Lendy Farolito has ordered us to follow that strategy, so doing otherwise could get us court martialed!"

"You do not understand," spat the Elite.

The current pit stop was just something added to the strategy. The Object lay at the foundation of the plan, so everything would be a waste if its abilities were hampered. If fighting with the measurement errors in the sensors led to the Gatling 033 being destroyed, who was supposed to take responsibility?

The maintenance soldiers did nothing.

Normally, the adjustments to the sensitive sensors would have been carried out by the girl herself under observation of the maintenance soldiers.

"Argh!! Oh ho ho. Then I will do it on my own!!"

To carry that out, the Elite opened the dozens of barriers leading from the cockpit. She would use an elevator to bring the cockpit itself up to the outer wall.

However, the cockpit never had a chance to ascend.

Something else happened before it could.

A noise came first.

It was the sound of cloth rubbing up against something. By the time she realized it was the sound of something sliding down a slope, it was too late.

She did not have time to turn around, much less undo her seatbelt.

"Excuse me, mademoiselle," said a voice from directly behind her.

She felt a cold object press against the back of her neck. It was a short-bladed knife.

"I do not normally sneak into a lady's bedroom, but I am woefully short on time. I will need you to just do what I tell you."

She recognized the intruder's voice.

It was the boy whose Legitimacy Kingdom comrades had called Quenser.

"Do not worry." The Elite girl shrugged and sighed with her body still held in by the seatbelt. "I was already planning to invite you in here. Oh ho ho."

Part 12

Quenser had managed to sneak into the Rush's cockpit.

He had used the Hand Axe plastic explosive, but not to blow something up. He had attached the clay-like bombs to the top of

the sensors to lower their sensitivity. If they had been noticed and someone tried to remove them, he could have hidden inside an arbitrary cannon barrel to hide from the enemy soldier and the blast. Then, he could have detonated the bomb to do some damage to the maintenance soldiers.

He knew they were short on time.

However, the Elite would not remain silent if there was some abnormality with the sensors.

The Elite might have headed out to check the sensors herself. Or she might have told the maintenance soldiers to do it or else she would not go out to fight. Either way, the Elite would still have to open up the barriers and exit the Object.

Quenser had been waiting near the exit connecting to the cockpit, so that had allowed him to sneak inside.

Even if an Object could not be destroyed from within, things were different when he was on the inside.

(This isn't really a plan. It's more or less a gamble. But I just had the best card dealt to me.)

Even with how close the princess and the old maintenance lady were, they still discussed in much detail the delicate adjustments that needed to be made to the sensors. If those partners did not have such a close understanding of each other, the princess would likely have dealt with the sensors directly. Quenser had seen Elites using tools in documentaries he had seen.

An Elite saw the Object as part of her body, so a slight error in the sensors was like wearing glasses that were not quite right. Rather than having any direct results, it would wear down her concentration.

(Only the Elite is risking her life. It isn't surprising that she would be a bit of a perfectionist when it comes to the condition of the Object. With every second and every instant counting, she likely felt it would be faster to do it herself rather than continuing to argue.)

The blade Quenser was pressing against the Elite's neck was a small cooking knife from his survival kit. The actual blade was only as long as his thumb.

Quenser was reaching his arm around the chair.

(What…? That's rather low.)

He frowned.

From what he had heard in the Oceanian military nation, the Rush's Elite had a nice body with G-cup breasts.

But what he actually found was a girl of at most 10. She was maybe 130 cm tall. She of course did not have a G-cup. With her body type, it was doubtful if she had ever even seen a bra.

He had no idea if she was aware of it, but her special suit was designed like a white school swimsuit worn over a skintight red under-suit that covered her entire body. Just like with the princess' s, it showed no sign of any attempt at camouflage.

The Elite girl must have been able to see Quenser's face reflected in the monitor because she remained calm even with the knife at her throat.

"Oh ho ho. Surprised? The Information Alliance views truth as just and falsehoods as evil. However, intentional lies can be used as an attack on enemies."

"You've gotta be kidding me."

Real sorrow seemed to cover Quenser's face.

He repeated himself as if to say farewell to the nice body and G-cup he had imagined in his mind's eye.

"…Sob…You've gotta be kidding me…Sob…"

"Wait a second. I'm going to get mad if it brings tears to your eyes. This body type is excellent in its own way, don't you think? Oh ho ho. Back in the home country, I act as an Idol Elite that sings and dances."

"But your official profile said you have that nice body and G-cup. How could you fool everyone that much!?"

"Oh ho ho. I have a dummy body displayed on a screen in full 3DCG. It is a shame that some call me a liar for that, but the motion is completely based on my own data."

In the Information Alliance, all sorts of data was managed over the internet and truths and falsehoods were used strategically. It was possible the people there knew it was likely nothing more than wartime propaganda, but they did not care if it was virtual so long as they could get emotionally invested.

"By the way, this conversation is being transmitted to those outside. You will be surrounded before long. Oh ho ho."

"That doesn't matter. You are the only one that can use this Object. If they take any careless actions, I will put an end to their Elite's life. I would rather not go that far, though. …You can hear me out there, can't you?"

Quenser ignored that girl's nonsense and moved on to the mission at hand.

He looked around the cockpit.

It was odd.

The area was a sphere of about 2 meters across with a giant monitor attached to the front. To that extent, it was the same as the princess's Baby Magnum.

However, while the Baby Magnum had many different forms of interfaces such as a control column, buttons, a keyboard, a trackball, and more, the Rush used only one form of input.

Keyboards.

A large number of keyboards were lined up on three stepped levels. And the third step spread out in a U-shape around the edge of the cockpit. Quenser had no idea how that was an efficient layout. It was possible not even other Elites would understand. It must have been designed based on a line of reasoning that only worked for the girl who piloted the Rush.

In the space not taken up by keyboards, an inscription read " Manual Interface 'JULIET' ". Quenser wondered if that was the Elite girl's name.

(I guess an Object really can't be piloted by anyone but its Elite …)

Quenser felt like an idiot for the faint hope he had briefly held.

Quenser gathered strength in the hand holding the knife and spoke in as low a voice as he could.

"First, close all the barriers leading to the cockpit. I'm sure those outside will complain, but ignore them."

"Oh ho ho. That will only cut off your escape route."

"Just hurry up and do it. I would rather not slice through a girl's skin as a meaningless threat."

"I must praise you for still treating me like a girl. Oh ho ho."

Quenser raised the blade he had pressed against the girl's neck.

The Elite girl shrugged to indicate she was giving in and pressed a few keys. Her 5 slender fingers moved at an inhuman speed like a sewing machine. At the Elite's command, the dozens of barriers through the pathway leading to the cockpit closed.

The maintenance soldiers sent several alarmed transmissions.

However, they received no response.

After all, Quenser had the Elite's movements sealed.

"Oh ho ho. Welcome to the most private love seat in the world. …You have now hijacked an Object with nothing but a knife. You really do love doing unprecedented things, don't you?"

"Listen to what I have to say and do not say anything more than necessary. That is how you can survive this."

"What should I do next? Should I shoot the Statue of Liberty with my main cannons or something?"

"Don't do anything," was Quenser's sharp command. "Even once the maintenance finishes, do not move. Do not respond to the communications from the maintenance soldiers. Do not move a finger until our princess has completed her preparations…no, until she has declared checkmate. That is all."

"Oh, dear. Oh ho ho. Should you really be saying that?"

"Do not try anything. I am not used to this. It's possible the tension could make my arm tremble enough to slit your throat."

"No, not that. Oh ho ho," said the Elite girl with a smile on her face.

That was the difference that experience made. Quenser could not believe that she had the nerves to smile while an enemy soldier was holding a knife to her throat.

But the Elite was truly calm.

He probably should have put more thought into why that was.

"If I am not holding the 'reins', not even I know how much of a rampage the Gatling 033 will run. Oh ho ho."

Quenser did not understand what she meant.

But shortly thereafter, the answer became evident.

Quenser's body was thrown by the monstrous power of inertia, sending him slamming into the wall.

The maintenance vehicles surrounding the Rush were knocked away and the maintenance soldiers ran screaming out of the way, but Quenser was too focused on himself to care what was going on outside.

"Gah!?"

All the oxygen in his lungs rushed out in an instant.

The knife fell from his hand.

The Object had suddenly moved. He could tell that much, but he felt practically weightless. The force was simply too great to just brace himself against. His vision blurred at high speed, but he could still see the Elite girl grinning while held in her seat by the seatbelt.

With the threat of the knife gone, the girl contacted her allies.

"Oh ho ho. The main cannon has been replaced, correct?"

"Gatling 033, we heard what is going on there, but you can't possibly mean to head out with that Legitimacy Kingdom soldier still aboard!"

"And what if I am? Either way, there is no way to force open the Object's barriers from the outside. And right now, every minute and every second of delay could greatly affect the outcome of the battle. I have no choice but to head on. Unless you wish to raise the white flag here."

"But…!!"

"Then are you going to raise the white flag? On whose authority? Are you going to waste a possible victory against an Object due to a single flesh-and-blood soldier?" The Elite girl spoke slowly but with a steady voice. "First of all, we should not be discussing my own safety here. What matters is if the maintenance is complete or not. And whether my Gatling 033 can continue fighting or not. So can my Gatling 033 fight?"

"…"

"Answer me. This is crucial to our strategy."

"Y-yes. We just now finished the replacement of the main cannon. But we have not managed to deal with the sensors you ordered us to-…"

"That is fine," said the Elite girl, cutting him off. She turned to face Quenser who was coughing on the floor before finishing. "But I do not feel like operating the Gatling 033 in that state. I have no choice but to leave this to the Strategic AI Juliet. Oh ho ho."

"…!?"

Quenser's body stiffened in shock at the term "AI".

"Wait a second!!" shouted the maintenance soldier. "Juliet's complete Object control is still in the third stage of testing! The odds of misfires based on erroneous detections or judgments goes up, raising the risk of friendly fire!!"

"If I narrow the possible targets down to the anti-Object level of 50 meters and up, that will not be a problem. Oh ho ho."

"But Juliet is too dangerous to use in its current state!! If we give it complete control of our greatest weapon, who knows how far the damage could spread!!"

"Oh ho ho. Please do not make me repeat myself," said the Elite girl. "If we simply follow the standard military codes, we will lose this battle. As we have a means of continuing to fight, I do not intend to end the fight prematurely. Oh ho ho."

The Elite cut off the transmission and looked at Quenser once more.

"Surely you have heard the rumors of the Information Alliance working on a plan to make unmanned Objects. Oh ho ho."

"It can't be," groaned Quenser from the floor. "AI research is impractical. Something simple like a UAV that goes on periodic patrols is one thing, but no program can match an Elite in a high speed battle requiring quick improvisations."

"Are you talking about the Legitimacy Kingom's Angelina List? Oh ho ho."

"…"

"Oh ho ho. If I recall, that is a paper collecting the weaknesses and failures of AIs after repeated tests designed to be difficult for AI by a group of scientists opposed to the idea of AI. Running amok, freezing, and erroneous learning…I believe there were several patterns."

"The Angelina List is the world's standard barrier for creating strategic AI for Objects. The paper is free to access on the Legitimacy Kingdom's public database, so the Information Alliance most likely used it in their research. Something with simple movements like a UAV is one thing, but the system controlling an Object is too large and complex. With our current technology, it is impossible to create an AI that can pilot an Object with greater speed and flexibility than an Elite who has been thoroughly improved both mentally and physically."

"Oh ho ho. Are you talking about how AIs will choose the shortest path to victory too much, leaving openings for attack? Or how they will continue with vain attacks when in a situation their learned patterns do not know how to handle?"

"…"

"That just means it cannot be completely unmanned. Oh ho ho. When the Gatling 033 is used at full specs, it is not being controlled

by me. The Strategic AI Juliet generally pilots it while I deal with any mistakes caused by errors or bugs. Meaning…" The Elite grinned. This smile was different from her previous smiles. "If I do nothing, the Gatling 033 will begin a rampage."

Quenser was unable to hear her sentence through to the end.

The monstrous weapon known as an Object began using its full power.

Quenser learned firsthand what that meant.

A massive amount of inertia.

That power began squeezing at Quenser's insides.

"Gh…ah…!?"

Everything shook front and back, left and right.

A great pressure kept him from breathing.

"

Ghaaa

reaching his brain properly. Color gradually faded away from the edges of his vision. An unpleasant ringing in his ears took over his entire head.

The Rush was doing nothing special.

It was merely headed away from the maintenance base zone and towards the battlefield where the Baby Magnum awaited.

That was all it was doing and yet Quenser was on the verge of death.

All the while, the Elite girl grinned in her seat.

She looked like a young queen looking down in contempt at a bug crawling across the ground.

Quenser could not understand how she could be so calm.

The special suit she wore was not enough to explain it.

The only possibility he could think of was that she was made differently than a normal soldier down to the most fundamental construction of her body.

"Oh, dear. What has your eyes spinning like that? Oh ho ho. You will never be able to handle the Gatling 033's high speed battle like this."

As that girl of only about 10 spoke to Quenser, she calmly sipped at the straw of a drink sitting in her armrest.

For strategic PR purposes, the Information Alliance military had created an idealized G-cup Elite using a full 3DCG model. The people (whether they knew it was a lie or not) had accepted that. It was possible their ultimate objective there was to have the people accept that virtual ideal as a foundation to accepting an AI-controlled Object.

And…

"This is still only about 9 Gs. When the treads are used, it can momentarily exceed 12 Gs. Well, that is enough for any normal person to certainly lose consciousness, so try your best to bear with it. Oh ho ho. After all, I was kind enough to invite you to this special seat when I really should have handed you over to the Information Alliance military."

12 Gs.

It had been proven that a normal human could not withstand anything at that level. But for her, that room was like a bedroom. The Elite's body had been so thoroughly remade that it felt normal to her.

That concept sent a chill down Quenser's spine.

(So this is…an Elite…)

Quenser thought as something like foam seeped from the corner of his mouth.

(Their bodies have been altered for the sole purpose of piloting Objects into battles. Dammit. This is like a battle between a deep sea fish and a submarine…)

Modern soldiers would often jokingly say something.

Modern battlefields are so boring. If they really wanted us to fight wars, they should send one of those air-conditioned Objects our way.

But…

This was no joke.

Actually being aboard one of those monsters was enough to shorten your lifespan. Quenser was in such intense pain that he thought his blood vessels were going to burst and that his eyeballs were literally going to pop out of his head. Amidst it all, he decided that the people who piloted those Objects like it was nothing were not normal. Unless the human body was remade both inside and out, it was impossible.

While sprawled on the floor next to the wall, Quenser tried to stretch out his arm.

A great number of keyboards were installed around the Elite girl. It was possible that tapping just one of those small keys could end that nightmarish pain.

But he could not move his arm. All he could manage was making his fingertips twitch ever so slightly.

It was not just that he could not move his body.

A tremendous pressure was also holding down the thoughts and emotions in his head.

"Now, then."

Having restrained the enemy soldier with inertia rather than handcuffs or shackles, the Elite girl placed her drink back down next to her and brought her 10 fingers to the keyboards around her .

She was not piloting the Object.

As if she was holding the reins of a rampaging horse, she removed the unneeded commands from the hundreds and thousands the strategic AI was instantaneously calculating out.

"I now have what I wanted, so it is about time I finished with today's job. Oh ho ho."

The treads shot a blast of snow into the air and the Second Generation Rush shot across the snowy plain. The scenery visible in the monitor sped up all at once.

Quenser heard a familiar sound through the speakers.

It was the emergency siren used at his base. They had arrived within a few kilometers of the Legitimacy Kingdom convoy. He could see the tanks that had been deployed just in case frantically leaving the path of the Object.

(Shit…!! How far has the princess's maintenance gotten!?)

The joints on the back gathering the Baby Magnum's seven main cannons had been shot off. To replace the part, every damaged joint had to be removed and then it all had to be built back up.

He saw no way the Baby Magnum's seven main cannon arms could be fully functioning after such a short time.

Nevertheless, the princess's Object headed out from the convoy.

By showing an intention to fight, she was making sure the convoy would not be a valid target.

"Oh ho ho. So you have decided to show yourself."

A smile appeared on the Elite girl's face

This one was different yet again. It was tinged with cruelty.

"I need not even use my high precision sensors. It is clear only one of them can move. Oh ho ho. You must truly be desperate to come out to fight with only one of your seven main cannons functioning."

Objects had over 100 cannons both large and small, but only the main cannon class armaments could finish off another Object. That meant it was more logical to work towards getting one cannon up and running at full power rather than having all seven running at limited power.

However…

That only gave her the bare minimum of ability to keep fighting . Since it was assumed she could fight evenly with the enemy Object with all 7 main cannons functioning, she was clearly at an overwhelming disadvantage with just the one functioning main cannon.

"She might be purposefully keeping the others motionless to lull you into a false sense of security."

"Oh ho ho. Falsehoods are evil. You were fortunate enough to be captured by me. I suggest you quickly teach yourself the rules of the Information Alliance."

The Elite girl casually typed on the keyboards while ignoring that Quenser looked like he was about to cough up blood. She seemed to be adjusting the radio. Quenser thought she was preparing to contact her allies, but she was not.

She sent a transmission on a frequency that was intentionally easy to intercept by the Legitimacy Kingdom princess.

"Oh ho ho. Hello there, unrefined Legitimacy Kingdom Elite. If you raise the white flag, I promise to spare your lives."

"…Sorry, but military regulations do not allow the white flag to be raised before the Object has been destroyed."

"Fine, then." The Elite girl rhythmically tapped at the keys. "I have no obligation to be considerate. I merely have to blow you away. Oh ho ho."

The real battle began.

With a set amount of distance between each other, the two Objects each moved quickly to the left and right. The action looked like two opposing magnets being forcibly pushed towards each other. The two Objects moved at high speed in circles around each other as they fired their weapons at each other.

The princess was an expert at battle.

Even in her dismal situation of having only one functioning main cannon, she was not immediately dragged down into a disadvantageous situation. Even if they could not finish off the enemy Object, the Baby Magnum still had around 100 other cannons. The princess used them to blow away the snow on the ground and fired weak lasers to interfere with the enemy's sensors . While using disturbance tactics like that to dull the enemy's movements, she fired her one remaining main cannon.

However…

The Information Alliance girl was as much of an Elite as the princess.

She existed to pilot an Object.

She would lose everything if she could no longer pilot an Object .

That girl's body had been trained to the extreme, the amount of blood in her body was modified to stand up to high Gs, and she had been given artificially high amounts of iron to supply her with large amounts of oxygen. Even in those abnormal conditions that reached 10 Gs, she continued typing while humming.

The disturbance tactics were not working.

Even with one sensor sealed, multiple windows would immediately appear from which she could gather information from multiple angles. Using that, she continued the high speed battle.

She knew she could not avoid every attack, so she repeated bold , high-speed movements that focused on surely avoiding the attacks from the main cannon that could actually produce a fatal blow.

She repeatedly made quick, high-speed movements using the treads while trying to lure the Baby Magnum closer and closer to a position where the terrain would corner the princess against a cliff wall.

The princess was clearly in the disadvantage.

(Dammit…I need to…interfere with…her control…!!)

Quenser frantically tried to suppress the urge to vomit, but even moving a single finger was difficult as he lay sprawled out on the floor. There were plenty of keyboards close enough to easily reach if he could only stand up, but he could not even stretch his arm out to the side in those high Gs.

Suddenly, the Elite girl moved the Object sharply to the side. Quenser's body flew through the air and landed neatly in the Elite girl's seat.

"Oh ho ho. Leaving this to Juliet is so boring, how about the two of us take this time to get to know each other better… physically."

"Wha…!? Gh…What are you saying!?"

The intense power of the inertia was still affecting Quenser, so he was unable to give a proper response. He felt like a heavy sheet was being pressed down on his chest, so he could hardly breathe.

And then the princess's voice came in over the Rush's radio.

"…Quenser…?"

"W-wait, why are you using that heavy tone like you're speaking to some suspicious perso-…gfh!?"

"Oh ho ho! Oh ho ho ho ho!! There is no room left here for you, unrefined Legitimacy Kingdom Elite!! Now, let us show this to her. We can email her a picture of us with our cheeks pressed up against each other. Say cheese! …Oh, dear. The barriers are cutting

off the signal, so I cannot send it to the Legitimacy Kingdom with my phone."

"Quenser… I am sorry, but this is a battle with the Rush. …I have no idea why you are there, but if you do not escape soon, you will be blown away along with her."

"W-wait, wait. I'll do something about the Rush's movements from within…"

As he was being crushed down into the seat, Quenser tried to reach his trembling fingers toward one of the Elite's keyboards. However, the Elite girl slapped his hand down like she was scolding him.

Quenser's hand was so weak that was enough to knock his hand out of the way.

(…Damn…it… I can't even do this…)

The giant screen was divided up into windows that were covered with all sorts of constantly changing information.

The Strategic AI Juliet was piloting the Object.

One window displayed a tree diagram that must have represented what commands the AI was using. Quenser could not tell if the number of lines was 100 or 1000, but the Elite girl would rapidly type a few things on the keyboard and a few of the lines would turn red and be cut off. That must have been what she called "holding the reigns". The movements of the Object

gradually lost their unevenness and stiffness. That may have been because the AI was starting to "learn" from the progress of the battle, or it may have been because the Elite girl had grasped some of the AI's idiosyncrasies and was able to "revise" the commands more efficiently.

"…Gaahhhh…!!"

The great pressure of inertia squeezed at Quenser's heart even more.

As blood trailed from the corner of Quenser's mouth, something fell from his pocket. It was his wireless device. Seeing the small device sliding along the floor, the Elite girl gave a slight sneer.

"Oh ho ho. Even if you are within the cockpit, that cheap piece of junk cannot interfere with my interface. And trying to rely on a Legitimacy Kingdom supercomputer will not work either. The thick barriers cut off any and all signals."

Quenser ignored the Elite girl's gloating and stared at the screen of the handheld device that had slid a bit away.

The Strategic AI Juliet.

The radio transmission currently connected between the princess and the Elite girl.

The plastic explosive in his hand.

While still unable to move much, Quenser stared at the giant monitor with bloodshot eyes. He had a silent thought.

(I might have found the beginnings of a plan.)

Part 13

Meanwhile, the princess was breathing shallow breaths as she piloted the Baby Magnum.

The situation was changing from moment to moment. A dizzying amount of new information was constantly being displayed on the large monitor in front. Even with the device that read the movements of her eyes and sent commands based on them, it did not seem she could keep up with it all. The 200,000 ton mass moved quickly to the left or right to evade the Information Alliance Rush's attacks. The great pressure of the inertia brought on by those movements wore down her stamina. Her brain had been optimized to pilot that Object, so she brought out its full processing power even while more than half of the air she breathed in could not be taken in by her body.

The struggle continued.

Sometimes she seemed to have the upper hand, other times she did not.

However, the princess could tell something was different about this battle. She had only 1 of her 7 main cannons. If that one was taken out, it was all over. However, that was not what she was worried about.

It was more along the lines of the vague luck of a gambler.

She had an odd feeling that the state of the battle was sliding to the side. It was supposed to be a struggle purely along a straight line. However, she had a premonition of a new vector appearing that would greatly change the flow of the battle.

(This is bad…)

The signs pointed towards things changing for the worse.

If the situation changed, it would be like she was a toy ship floating in the bath when the drain plug was pulled out. The danger of things growing worse would rise drastically.

The princess knew that, but she had no way of changing the flow in that direction. She had her hands full keeping up with that high speed battle. She did not have time to focus on anything else.

But then…

"…Quenser to…Baby Magnum…"

The voice sounded like it was being squeezed out.

It was coming from the communications device installed in the cockpit. However, it was not coming from a Legitimacy Kingdom military frequency. It was the same frequency that she had been arguing with the Information Alliance Rush over.

(So is he really aboard that Object…?)

As that thought entered the princess's head, Quenser continued his transmission.

"I-I'm cornered over here. Can I ask you a favor just in case?"

"What?"

"If I kick the bucket here, I want you to return the engagement ring in the maintenance base zone barracks to my childhood friend Angelina from my hometown…"

"…"

The Baby Magnum fired its main cannon while completely ignoring the flow of the battle.

The Rush evaded the low-stability plasma cannon blast with a quick movement.

The princess was still expressionless, but her pupils were larger than usual, letting the piloting lasers in even more.

With an extremely calm voice, she said, "I am sorry, Quenser. I forgot to ask you if you would rather be shot with a coilgun, a laser, or a low-stability plasma cannon."

"Ugehhh!? The inertia from these evasive maneuvers is doing horrible things inside my body! You idiot! Don't fight seriously!! At this rate, you'll meet the same fate as when you were easily taken out by the Water Strider that is strewn about here!!"

"Quenser, now you are digging up things from the past that would best be kept buried? …And 'easily'?"

The increased firing and evading left Quenser only able to reply with groans.

"By the way, Quenser, if you would like to say anything else, now is the time."

"Ugh. R-really? Okay, then. Various things happened with this foreign girl named Etta who worked as efficiently as an AI at a restaurant back in the safe country, so could you give her the necklace I have in the barra-..gbheeeehhhh!?"

This time, the Rush took evasive actions back and forth that did not seem at all necessary to evade anything.

The Information Alliance Elite said, "…Oh ho ho. I too would like some questions answered about this childhood friend and these 'various things'."

"Bfh!? S-stop! Don't move back and forth like that!!"

Quenser seemed to be enduring unreasonable torture, but then he suddenly shouted, “Now’s your chance!!”

“?”

“Quenser to Baby Magnum!! Can you hear me!? The Rush’s Elite is taking actions not needed for the battle. This is your only chance to escape this bad situation! Evade to the right! Evade way to the right!!”

“…”

“Don’t get so mad!! Please just listen to what I’m telling you!!”

The princess frowned at his instructions.

They did not fit into the strategy she had put together. As the Object’s pilot, she knew it best. That was why she hesitated to immediately obey the piloting instructions of a boy who was more or less a complete amateur. But…

“At this rate, you’ll be cornered against the cliff face and shot with her main cannons once you can no longer move!! Trust me! I have a way to win this!! So evade to the right! Way to the right!! You’ll be blown away if you don’t!!”

It was true that she would soon be cornered.

And it was highly likely Quenser had made it into the Rush’s cockpit. He might have read something about the Rush’s strategy from something displayed on the monitor.

"…"

She made up her mind.

She moved the lever she was gripping tightly.

The Baby Magnum took a great evasive action to the right and the intense power of inertia struck her slender body.

But…

"Oh ho ho. Even if you are greatly mistaken, hearing that still pisses me off."

A slight chill had entered the Elite girl's voice.

The Rush spun around which must have created quite a bit of inertial power. Over the radio, the princess heard a pained gasp presumably from Quenser.

The bullets of light fired by the rapid fire beam cannon Gatling gun grazed the Baby Magnum's body slightly. The beam cannons continued to fire, crushing one of the princess's main cannons and sending it flying through the air.

Ignoring that, Quenser shouted, "…Gh…!? N-next, make a slight turn to the left!! Switch to the low-stability plasma canno-…gh!? Fire at the front of the Rush!! And…the Killer Squall sub-cannons!! Aim for the Water Strider wreckage…the the left!! Cough. If you melt the snow around it with the lasers…it can be used as cover!!"

"Oh ho ho! Oh ho ho ho ho ho ho ho!! I do not know what you are after, but you are too slow!! Even if you are trying to get my strategy across to her using information from the cockpit, you are too slow! By the time the unrefined Legitimacy Kingdom Elite can take action, the command will already be complete!!"

The enemy was exactly right.

Quenser's instructions would essentially waste the princess's last chance to attack. It was like knowing you would be checkmated in 100 turns, and then wasting half of that time. Even then, a thin portion of the Baby Magnum's armor had been peeled away and several of her cannons had been blown off to litter the Alaskan snow. Several warning windows had appeared and she could hear shouts from the operator monitoring the situation from the maintenance base zone.

Suddenly, the Baby Magnum's movements came crashing to a halt.

The enemy's main cannon had struck her near the core. Thousands and even tens of thousands of beams fired from the Gatling gun-style weapon. The thick armor glowed orange and the beams dug through it in no time. Sparks flew, the air explosively expanded, and a violent wind burst from the "wound" like it was a jet engine. That great wind kept the Baby Magnum from moving properly.

"I hope you have prepared yourself. Oh ho ho," said the Rush's pilot Elite with the tone of someone who had just placed their

queen in a crucial point. “This settles it!! You can regret not raising your readily available white flag while you burn in the depths of hell!! Oh ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho!!”

The princess gritted her teeth.

She hesitated over whether she should stop the ejection device that had automatically started to power up.

“Trust me.”

But…

Quenser’s voice over the radio had not given up.

“You can win like this.”

A great noise like a thick gear breaking rang out.

The princess had no idea what had happened.

That was not surprising.

It had not come from the Baby Magnum. As it was not something wrong with her own machine, it was completely natural for her to not understand what had happened.

But that meant…

“Quenser…?” muttered the princess.

Yes.

The Information Alliance Rush had been the unopposed ruler of the battlefield just a moment before, but it had completely stopped in the middle of the snow.

Part 14

The machine suddenly stopped.

Quenser was thrown across the floor, but he was not the only one damaged by it.

The immense inertial force caused by that truth stopped even the Rush's Elite girl's breathing for an instant.

"Gah…!? Wh-what!?"

The girl was coughing, but her voice held more confusion than pain.

The Information Alliance's Second Generation Gatling 033 operated based on high speed decisions made by the Strategic AI Juliet. The Elite girl did not completely pilot the Object. Instead, she selected and deleted the bugs and errors amid the hundreds or even thousands of commands Juliet created each second. Basically, she held the reins of a rampaging horse and guided it in the direction she wanted.

Nevertheless, the Gatling 033 was not moving.

It was not that the strategic AI had stopped. Juliet was still calculating at maddening speed.

However…

None of the seeming inexhaustible supply of commands it calculated out at high speed led to the Gatling 033 doing anything.

No matter how skilled a coachman the Elite girl may have been, she could do nothing when the horse stopped to think and did not take a single step forward. When the horse refused to move no matter how much she kicked it with her heels or struck it with her whip, the very value of the coachman was brought into question.

It was like a gear connecting the thoughts of the strategic AI to actual movement had been removed.

No matter how high the Juliet's specs were and no matter how skilled the Elite girl was, there was nothing that could be done if the Gatling 033 could not move.

"Ho…ho ho. Oh ho ho."

The Elite girl looked around while seated in the cockpit.

She then looked over at Quenser as he lay collapsed on the floor .

She was forced to view him as an actual opponent.

"What…? What did you do to my Gatling 033?"

Quenser did not reply immediately. The inertial forces that had squeezed at his body had done some damage. His mouth opened and closed wordlessly as he took deep breaths.

Finally, the boy gave a thin smile and said, "Are you hoping… to start a quiz show…?'

"Oh…ho ho. I can tell some of it from the situation."

The girl's small shoulders were trembling.

Trembling in bewilderment and anger.

"I can tell that Juliet is carrying out unnecessary 'learning'!! I can tell that has caused various bugs and errors which are causing a conflict over which commands to prioritize!! The bugs and errors are spreading so quickly, my 'revisions' cannot keep up!! I am asking about something beyond that! I am not asking what is happening! I am asking why!! What did you do to Juliet!?"

"It is reevaluating the risks," said Quenser despite being unable to even sit up.

Fatigue and pain seeped into his voice, but there was no weakness there.

That boy had successfully become an equal opponent to that Elite who piloted a giant weapon known as an Object.

"The Juliet has keenly noticed some changes to the situation that you cannot see. These changes have made a major change to the priority of what the Rush should do."

"Wha-…?"

"It's unfortunate, though. This strategic AI pilots an Object that can alter the outcome of a war, and yet it seems not to have the ability to raise the white flag and surrender. Thanks to that, the Juliet has no choice but to continue calculating out a way to resolve the situation despite being in clear checkmate. The Rush has come to a halt because the Juliet is vainly trying to think up a way out of the situation."

"That's…That's ridiculous!!" denied the Elite girl reflexively. " Oh ho ho!! My Gatling 033 had the overwhelming advantage!! There is no way I would have lost to that unrefined Legitimacy Kingdom First Generation Object here! Even if you were advising her via radio, there is no way I would have been in checkmate!!"

"I was not advising the princess," said Quenser decisively and the Elite girl froze in place. "Like hell I have a childhood friend named Angelina. And what kind of nickname is Etta? That was a surprisingly simple code referring to a report in the Legitimacy Kingdom military database."

"Angelina…report…Etta…Juliet… You don't mean…!?"

"Since you're the one that went out of your way to contact your enemy, you should have known that the transmission being sent to

the Baby Magnum could be picked up by other soldiers' radios too ."

Part 15

A while before when the Baby Magnum and the Rush were firing at each other at high speed, a small figure was moving through the snowy plain that was littered with Water Strider wreckage.

It was Heivia.

He was listening to Quenser's voice coming from his radio.

At first, it sounded like he was using the Rush's communications equipment to give advice to the princess. However…

("I'm cornered over here". That was the code phrase to indicate a secret discussion about a porn magazine check. The "foreign girl " must have been referring to the Rush. Since he also used the name "Angelina", the term AI can likely be taken at face value.)

"Ugh. Dammit Quenser. You rely on your beautiful genius of a noble partner a bit too much," Heivia said to no one in particular.

His handheld device was displaying the design of the Water Strider. It was the one the Legitimacy Kingdom military had drawn up from an analysis of the technology in the enemy Object.

(Heading to the right and turning to the left. Why do his instructions have to be such a pain in the ass?)

Just the main body of the Object was 50 meters across, so the design was quite large. Heivia scrolled the screen as Quenser instructed and marked the necessary components.

(Now I just have to use the map to check where those parts are on the battlefield.)

"Made it! Made it!"

Heivia stopped at one of the places he had marked.

It was a main cannon-class low-stability plasma cannon lying bent in the snow.

"Y'know, I'm little disturbed that I was able to figure out what Quenser meant so well. I'd rather have this kind of tacit understanding with a girl."

He lowered his bag from his back.

Inside were a large number of batteries. They were the backups prepared for the electric drill.

Heivia's original mission had been to work with Quenser to drill holes in the cliff wall, stuff explosives inside, and efficiently bring the wreckage down. Heivia had been carrying quite a burden to support Quenser.

However, those batteries were nowhere near enough to power an Object's main cannon.

Luckily, Heivia had no intention of doing that.

"Well, just getting the infrared targeting system running should be enough to fool it."

He peered in through a tear in the armor on the side of the cannon where it had been bent in the middle. He stuck his hand inside and pulled out a giant electromagnet. He unwound the lead wrapped around the cylindrical container to create a coil and then rewound it to create a different coil.

"Electromagnetic induction~. That's what transformers use~," sang Heivia as he used the square-shaped metal core to prepare a large coil and a small coil.

He then faced the infrared targeting device that was as large as a log.

It was surrounded by armor that a normal bombardment would not budge, but it could not be maintained if there was no way of getting at it. Heivia used his tools to open a panel on the armor. He attached a battery to the cable and transformer inside. Then, he removed the wireless detonation device from a Hand Axe electric fuse and added it to his impromptu device.

Now, he could freely run the Water Strider's infrared aiming device with the flick of a switch on his radio.

"The Water Strider had 8 main cannons, right? Well, just 3 of them should be enough."

Heivia looked back at the design from the Legitimacy Kingdom military database that had been created with the intention of using the technology from the destroyed enemy Object. He then began moving again.

Partway there, he found an off road vehicle that had likely been abandoned by the Information Alliance when it could not make it past the giant pieces of wreckage.

He climbed aboard and said, "The plan is to confuse the Rush's AI by adding in unnecessary calculations, but why am I the one running around doing all the work?"

Heivia's goal was plain and simple.

He would fix up just the targeting devices for the Water Strider weapons scattered about the snowy plain and set them to run when he sent a radio signal.

Using that, he would make the Rush's strategic AI mistakenly conclude that the Water Strider's main cannons were still functional and so the Rush had to constantly keep that danger in mind.

After that, Heivia had switched the 8 main cannons' targeting devices on and off at high speed and in a certain pattern. By

continually giving the strategic AI unnecessary calculations and having it "learn" unnecessary and incorrect things, the high level calculation ability would work in vain for a while.

He had the source for this information in his hands.

The Angelina List.

That report had been put together by the Legitimacy Kingdom military and it contained countless records of problems and failures of AIs that had led to AI research being declared " unrealistic".

Of course, that alone would not function as a weakness of the Rush's strategic AI.

The Information Alliance had the most advanced AI research in the world, so they would have already come up with countermeasures for those things.

It was like using a computer virus on a computer that had a proper countermeasure for that virus.

However, just the foundations were enough.

Heivia was not simply going to use the Angelina List. Like he was creating a subspecies of that virus, he just had to create a new problem right then and there.

He already had the knowledge and skills required.

While he usually seemed to do nothing but run around the battlefield with a rifle, Heivia Winchell was a radar analyst.

He was an expert when it came to viewing the battlefield as a board and the Object as a game piece in order to search out the idiosyncrasies and weaknesses of the enemy machine from its movements.

Part 16

"Oh…ho ho… You used the Angelina List…to make her stop and think…?"

Having heard Quenser's explanation, the Elite girl sat in the Rush's cockpit with her small body trembling.

Quenser had finally managed to slowly get up from the floor and he wiped away some of the blood flowing from his nose and ears due to the inertia. He spoke to the Elite girl of the stopped Gatling 033 once more.

"Shouldn't you be doing something? Now is your only chance to stop the Juliet."

"Ho…Oh ho ho… What do you mean…?"

"Even now, the Rush continues its wasted thinking. Countless bugs and errors are created and vie for priority. Before long, there will be too many for even an Elite's thoughts to keep up with."

"…"

"An AI is not just a program. Its ability to learn can be both a plus and a minus. At this rate, the problems are going to multiply explosively. An AI that is rapidly learning in an erroneous direction should be forcibly terminated as early as possible. Otherwise, the Juliet will fatally damage its own script."

Quenser was grinning as he spoke.

He must have had a good guess as to what "forcibly terminating" the AI would entail.

(Kh… He's right. I have no choice but to perform a forced termination on Juliet in this situation.)

The Elite girl bit her lip.

(The Object is too large and complex a system and the strategic AI must constantly simulate the movements of the enemy and the progression of the battle, so it cannot be turned on and off so easily . Once I perform the forced termination, it will take time to reactivate it!!)

And since the system was intended to be run primarily by the strategic AI, it was clear what risk there would be in having that AI shut off.

Whether she let Juliet continue thinking or manually shut it down, she would be left at an overwhelming disadvantage.

At some point her choices had been downgraded from "win or lose" to "lose one way or lose another way".

The Elite girl trembled at the great change to the situation, but she had another thought as well.

"…"

That boy was not normal.

It was true that it had been the boy's partner who had actually taken action. However, it had been the boy in the cockpit who had originally thought up the method and had created the perfect opportunity to carry it out.

Even if someone had come up with that plan and tried to use it as a means of recovering, would they have been able to pull it off so perfectly on an unpracticed first attempt? Would they have been able to accurately get across their idea using an easily-misunderstood transmission filled with code words without having any kind of agreement beforehand?

To take care of such a broad threat, a foundation had to be laid first.

And what was most frightening was that the Legitimacy Kingdom boy had not had the slightest clue that any trouble of that nature would be occurring.

He had not undergone any kind of specialized training.

And yet he had succeeded with an impromptu plan.

How open-minded would someone have to be in order to pull that off?

"What will you do?" Quenser gave his ultimatum. "Will you let the Juliet destroy itself or will you forcibly terminate it? Choose how you want this to end yourself. The delinquent soldier helping me has likely explained the situation to the princess, so she will hold back for now. However, that is no guarantee. If our commander orders her to prioritize destruction over acquiring the technology, she will immediately shoot you with her main cannon."

"Ho."

And…

The Elite girl's small shoulders moved up and down.

She was laughing.

"Ho…ho ho. Oh ho ho. Oh ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho!! You are right. I will give you that much!! Juliet is done for now. Letting her continue her calculations will accomplish nothing, so I have no choice but to perform a forced termination!!" The Elite girl did not stop there, however. "But do not think this is over."

A painfully high-pitched noise reverberated through the cockpit.

The Elite girl had forcefully struck one of the keys on the countless keyboards.

In the next instant, all illumination disappeared from the monitor and lights.

Darkness ruled for an instant.

That was proof of all the systems having stopped.

However…

As she had announced, the Rush did not stop there.

A combination of static from multiple sources slammed into Quenser's ears. At the same time, the monitor and lights lit up once more. With a mechanical noise, the angles of the countless keyboards surrounding the Elite girl were adjusted.

They were now positioned so it was easier for a human to use them all.

They were now positioned so her ten fingers could race across them even faster.

"Full key touch. Release," she announced.

There was a smile on the Elite girl's face. It was not the calm expression of one in a privileged class. It was the extremely wild smile of someone crossing swords with their destined enemy on the battlefield.

"Oh ho ho!! The Gatling 033 is primarily intended to be piloted by Juliet with me performing 'revisions', but I do not recall saying that it could not be piloted any other way!! I can pilot it on my own if necessary!!"

One hundred cannons, many more sensors and radars gathering data, a complex propulsion device that used both treads and an air cushion, and a reactor that produced massive amounts of power.

She was announcing that she could control it all with just her 10 fingers.

That was not something any normal human would ever think of doing.

Even a normal tank was usually run by 4 or 5 people, but that reasoning did not apply to an Elite whose body and mind had been thoroughly improved.

Computers carried out all sorts of tasks in the background that normal people were never aware of. She was basically saying she could take care of all of that better than the computer by manually entering it all one letter of the alphabet or number at a time.

And…

If she truly could continue fighting, it was clear as day which Object would have the advantage.

The Baby Magnum was truly cornered.

If things continued, the princess would be the one destroyed.

"Oh ho ho. I must praise your skill for coming up with that weakness of Juliet's."

The Elite girl's fingers stopped to hover above the keyboards.

The pause was as filled with tension as if she had the barrel of a gun pressed against the back of her enemy's head.

"But that has just made me want you even more!! Such quick thinking. Such application. You are perfect for my unit!! Honestly. Ho ho. Honestly. Oh ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho!! Why do you light such a fire in my heart!? Oh ho ho!!"

But…

"Stop," said Quenser quietly.

He used a finger to wipe up some blood that was dripping down from his ear and slowly crawled across the cockpit floor.

"This is a useless struggle. You cannot defeat our princess like this."

"Oh ho ho. And what proof of this do you-…"

The Elite girl trailed off.

Quenser had used his finger to write something in red on the floor.

A bomb has been set up.

The Elite girl looked at Quenser in shock, and he wrote more on the floor in blood.

Cut off all transmissions. Including the ones monitored in the background.

"What…?"

Quenser slammed his palm against the wall.

His gaze said it all.

Do not speak.

Whatever you do, do not speak.

If you overlook this opportunity, you are doomed.

He had no time to deal with the Elite girl's confusion.

"…"

The girl's slender fingers hovered hesitantly above the keyboards for a few seconds. Finally, she hit the switch. After seeing her finger move, Quenser slowly got up.

"Over there. On the floor below the cockpit seat, a plastic explosive has been set up. It is likely to be used in emergencies. Did they not tell you anything about this?"

For a bit, the girl did not move. After that, she shook her head for some reason. She may have wanted to deny something. However, Quenser gave no response. Silence reigned. The Elite girl undid her seatbelt with trembling hands and slowly stood up. She timidly circled around behind the seat and peered underneath.

She then staggered as if she was feeling faint.

"Why?" Her whispered voice could be heard throughout the small cockpit. "Why would they set up something like this? Oh ho ho. Losing the Object or its Elite means certain death for my unit."

"An Object is a monstrous weapon that cannot be destroyed even with a nuke. When it is controlled by a single Elite, the military will fear the Elite turning on them. If the Object did turn its main cannons on its own base, no one would be able to stop it." Quenser leaned against the wall and took a long, slow breath before continuing. "And the Rush is controlled by a strategic AI. There is even more danger of a rampage since there could be a bug in the program that the Elite cannot take care of fast enough. That is why they created an 'emergency shutoff' for themselves. There is probably a similar bomb installed on the Juliet's main computer in addition to this one in the cockpit."

"…"

"But that is not the biggest problem."

The Elite girl understood what he was trying to say.

Quenser pointed towards where the bomb was with his index finger that was wet with blood.

"The detonation counter has begun. It may be linked to a major error occurring in the strategic AI."

"Impossible! Ho…oh ho ho. I-I am the Elite of the Gatling 033! They would not dispose of me so simply!!"

"The Elite is important, but only so long as the military views it that way," spat out Quenser in reply. "I have seen an Elite being discarded. When the princess was defeated by the Water Strider here in the Alaska district, she was used as a decoy so the unit could retreat. An Elite only has value when combined with a functioning Object. And as long as they have the Juliet and the public 3D model, they do not even need to tell the people if you die. Is there perhaps a backup? Is the Juliet saved to some area of memory in the network?"

"Kh!!"

The Elite girl leaped back into the cockpit chair and reached for the communications system's switch.

But Quenser said, "Stop. They did not want you to know about the bombs. It is entirely possible they will remotely detonate them the instant you ask about them. They might decide your knowledge would lead you to betray them."

The Elite girl's finger stopped an instant before reaching the key .

As she remained motionless, Quenser continued.

"Why do you think the bombs were set up only in the cockpit and the main computer? Because they want to keep the damages to a minimum so they can switch out just the interior and reuse the Object. Normally, only you can pilot the Gatling 033 because it was modified just for you. However, if they only use the frame and reconstruct the inner portion similar to another Object, they can swap in another Elite fairly quick. This way, they can discard an Elite they can no longer use and move over to the next plan with a minimum cost."

"I…I would never betray them or go on a rampage!! Ho…ho ho. And the erroneous learning of the Strategic AI Juliet is due to the vulnerabilities of the program!!"

"But what do you think the commanders back at your base zone are thinking right now? They saw the Rush suddenly stop when it should have been able to continue fighting. It is not the Rush or the Elite that the Information Alliance military cares about. It is the Strategic AI Juliet."

"…!!"

The Elite clenched her fist.

She stood up, swaying, and slammed her small fist into Quenser's face as he sat with his back against the wall. She did not stop with just one or two hits. She continued on and on and on and on and on. She punched him with all of her strength again and again.

"This is…! This is all your fault!! I did…nothing wrong!!"

The dull sounds continued on.

The girl's shoulders trembled.

She was not running out of stamina.

Her humiliation, her anger, and the fear she could no longer hide were making her body tremble.

"What will you do?" Quenser asked the Elite girl with his split lips. "The plastic explosives will detonate in another 10 minutes at this rate. The bomb here is not that big, but the blast is enough to kill any human in this enclosed space. Do you understand the situation now? What will you do?"

"…"

The Elite girl swung her fist up, but then stopped.

Her trembling reached its peak. That cockpit surrounded by thick walls had likely been akin to a cradle for her. Feeling real danger in there may have given her claustrophobic fear for the first time in her life.

She motionlessly breathed shallow breaths and Quenser sighed.

"Where is the ejection device?"

"?"

"Where is the control device for ejection? I came to the battlefield to study Object design as a battlefield student. I can look into it. If the ejection is linked to the bomb, you can't just activate it . I need to cut the cord connecting it first."

Quenser placed a hand on the wall and slowly stood up with his face swelling from the pummeling it had taken.

The Elite girl hesitated for a second, but finally said, "Th-the ejection device is built into the seat. Oh ho ho."

"I see. So it's the same as our princess's."

Quenser pulled some small tools out of his uniform's pockets. The screws in the cockpit chair were made in a special shape, so his Legitimacy Kingdom tools would not work. However, he pulled out a small pair of pliers and directly rotated the heads of the screws.

After removing four screws, he pulled off a small panel.

He saw several cables and an air compressor used to tighten the seatbelt.

As he looked inside, he said, "Here it is. It is connected. But it doesn't use some complex system to connect the cord or anything. This isn't some puzzle like the time bombs in movies. I can take care of this simply enough." Quenser grabbed the Elite girl's shoulders and sat her down in the cockpit chair. "Put on the seatbelt again. Eject after I cut the cord. That should take care of this. This is still a battlefield with rules. As long as you go through the proper steps, you won't be shot out of the air or pursued across the snowy plain after you eject."

"Wh-why…?"

"This is war. I am not doing this out of kindness." Quenser circled around behind the chair and stretched an arm inside where he had removed the panel. "As I told you before, I came here to study Object design. Ultimately, I do not care who wins or loses the war…as long as our lives are not in danger, that is. And as a student, this is a chance to drive the pilot Elite out and capture an enemy Object almost completely unharmed. This is a key to getting rich quick. Normally, I would never get to study a Second Generation Information Alliance Object."

The Elite girl blinked in confusion while held in place by her seatbelt.

In response, Quenser said, "This is a one time deal. The next time we meet, we'll be enemies. We'll be forced to fight to the death. Keep this a secret from the princess. If it turns out I let an

enemy Elite escape, I could very well be court martialed. Normally , it seems you would be used in negotiations between nations."

A loud snipping sound could be heard.

It was the sound of Quenser cutting the cord connecting the ejection device to the bomb.

Now she could eject.

His arm reached around the chair and headed for the red ejection key.

That was when the Elite girl realized something.

"W-wait a second! The ejection device can only eject me, and the bomb's detonator is still functioning! You will just be trapped here-…"

"Yes," Quenser readily admitted. "I'll deal with the rest myself. As I said, this is a key to getting rich quick. It's worth risking my life for. At the very least, it's worth risking my life more than fighting deadly battles for the interests of the higher ups is. If the Elite does not eject soon to display that you can no longer fight, the princess will destroy the Object. Once that happens, I'll have nothing left to study."

"Wai-"

"Make sure you survive. I'll make the proper preparations so you can."

Before the Elite girl could complain any further, Quenser slammed down the red ejection key.

The dozens of barriers set throughout the tunnel-like passageway all opened up. After the route was confirmed to be open, the Elite girl's seat was forcefully launched out.

It took less than 10 seconds for her to exit the tunnel. Once she had exited the Object, the Elite herself was launched from the chair and a parachute activated.

"…"

With that, the war was over.

Left alone, Quenser unsteadily moved backwards until his back struck the wall.

While leaning against the wall, he slid down to a sitting position .

His focus lay only on the presence of the plastic explosive sitting on the floor where it had been set up to kill the Elite.

Part 17

The Strategic AI Juliet of the Information Alliance's Gatling 033 had been shut off and the Elite girl who had mastered the technique of manually controlling the entire Object had ejected.

With the Gatling 033 truly unable to move, the war in Alaska came to an end. Naturally, the Legitimacy Kingdom was the victor.

"…"

After landing on the snow with her parachute, the Elite girl turned tail and ran, but the Legitimacy Kingdom Object did not pursue her. That was proof that she stood upon a clean battlefield ruled by a type of law and order. The Elite girl bit her lip in humiliation, but she had no way to fight back in her current situation. Retreating as quickly as possible when given the opportunity was the duty of the loser.

She ran for kilometer after kilometer across the cold snow.

Even inside her special suit made with cutting edge technology, she was gradually losing heat.

As she gritted her teeth at the bitterness of defeat, the Elite girl heard the sound of snow being crushed. However, it was too smooth a noise to be human footsteps. It was an Information Alliance off-road vehicle. Since the noise of an engine would draw in enemies, the Information Alliance usually used hybrids. The electric motor made much less noise. Issues of horsepower and driving distance prevented them from using fully electric vehicles. The gasoline engine would be used for terrain with harsher slopes and the electric motor would be used when enemy troops were likely around.

The off-road vehicle stopped in front of the Elite girl. The door opened and the commander of the Information Alliance's maintenance base zone stepped out. Her name was Lendy Farolito. She was a woman of about 20 with brown skin and silver hair. She was one of the young officers who were growing rather common in recent years.

The fact that the commander had personally come to the front lines may have been a form of respect for the Elite. Or perhaps the commander simply had nothing better to do with the war over.

"Thank goodness… It seems you managed to survive," said Lendy with a relieved expression.

The Elite girl remained silent and simply looked at her commander. Lendy seemed to interpret that hard look as coming from the shock of defeat.

"For now, we need to retreat. The intelligence department trying to analyze the technology from the Object wreckage will probably resent us. The facility they set up to transmit their data will likely be destroyed by the Legitimacy Kingdom now. However, we have no duty to continue fighting to the last man once our Object has been lost. We can deal with this digitally. A certain amount of data has already been gathered from the wreckage, so this was not without any results. And the higher ups do not seem insistent that we stick with this. Fortunately, we were deemed to be a card worth preserving."

Lendy crouched down to put herself on eyelevel with the short Elite girl.

She looked like a parent or a teacher.

However, the Elite girl could not forget two facts.

The fact that a bomb had been set up inside the cockpit and the fact that a detonation signal had been sent to it after the situation had grown unfavorable.

"Losing the Gatling 033 is a painful blow, but the Information Alliance military emphasizes piloting systems and strategic AI, so we should be fine. The Juliet was backed up and you can still be used. Constructing an entire Object would take 3 or 4 years, but we can take one in construction and change the layout to suit our needs. That way, it won't take too long before you can get back to it."

"…"

"The biggest problem is the fear that the Legitimacy Kingdom will retrieve the Gatling 033 and analyze the data and technology concerning the Strategic AI Juliet. But we do not need to worry about that. The main circuits and memory devices in the Gatling 033 have heating elements installed to deal with that. With the circuits directly fried, all the crucial technology will be erased, so-…"

A high-pitched noise rang out.

It came from Lendy Farolito's cheek.

The Elite girl had slapped her commander.

In a stiff voice, the Elite girl said, "If you try something like that again, I really will turn my main cannons on your base zone."

Having been slapped, Lendy looked at the Elite girl with an expression of bewilderment. The Elite girl did not feel like dealing with her commander if she was going to feign ignorance. She headed for the back seat of the off-road vehicle while ignoring Lendy who was holding her cheek with one hand.

(That boy.)

The Elite girl thought while ignoring the driver who was remaining silent due to the odd atmosphere.

(It may be safer to keep an engineer like him as a confidant than a soldier who excels at giving suspicious pretexts for everything. …Oh ho ho. Now I want him even more.)

Part 18

Meanwhile, Quenser held his radio to his ear in the Rush's cockpit. The thick barriers had prevented the radio signal from getting through before, but the tunnel-like passageway had opened up during the ejection. That meant he could now use his radio.

He was speaking with his large-breasted commander.

"The battle is over. I've gotten us the Second Generation Information Alliance Object almost completely intact. Send over some people from the electronic simulation department who know how to deal with the data processing. Of course, any staff familiar with the Information Alliance format would be best. A strategic AI called Juliet was stopped due to a conflict over commands, but it would be best not to leave it for too long. An auto-scan or self-restart could begin which might lead to the reactor being detonated to keep their data from us."

"Understood, Quenser. First the Water Strider and now this. This really is a mountain of treasure for the Legitimacy Kingdom."

"Tell me when you're going to dismantle it. I would appreciate it if you could negotiate with the higher ups to get me in first."

"Hmm, I can't promise anything. The analysis of the latest technology of an enemy nation will likely become a national project. They might not let you due to fears that letting a student participate could damage some sensitive circuitry and prevent a proper analysis."

"I guess it isn't that easy…" sighed Quenser.

Either way, a report on the analysis of the Rush would be uploaded to the military database. He could learn a lot from that. There was more than one path to becoming a designer, so he decided it might be best to let this one slide.

After ending the transmission with Froleytia, Quenser began coughing. The intense inertial forces had injured him internally.

He had blood coming from his ears and nose. It would likely be best if he received a full medical inspection once he returned to the maintenance base zone.

After that thought, Quenser noticed a new incoming transmission on his radio.

It was from Heivia.

"Hey, Sir Knight. It seems the plan to cause erroneous learning in the AI to stop the Object was a success. You should thank me. They might have to add a new strategy to the training manual for new recruits next year."

"The Information Alliance won't make the same mistake twice. They'll have a countermeasure the next time we meet. A technique used once is an outdated technique. The battlefield is being constantly updated, so even the best information can become worthless in no time."

"I heard a plastic explosive had been set in the cockpit to prevent the Elite from turning on them."

"Thanks to that, I was easily able to get the Elite to eject. It seems she was able to control the Rush using full key touch. If it hadn't been for that disagreement with her comrades, this battle might have lasted quite a bit longer."

"Hmm," said Heivia half-heartedly.

And then…

"By any chance, was that bomb made of Hand Axe?"

Quenser fell silent.

He glanced over.

The plastic explosive was definitely set up there. The name of the explosive used was Hand Axe. A gram of it was more valuable than a gram of platinum, and it was developed by the Legitimacy Kingdom military. Naturally, the Information Alliance had no way of manufacturing it.

What looked like a detonator was actually a decoration created from the cords meant for a wired detonation and the LCD screen taken from a pen-shaped wireless fuse.

Finally, Quenser spoke into the radio once more.

"…This is war. I wasn't doing it out of kindness."

"That was a bit of a cruel method. But just a bit. You could have been more thorough. You just needed to prevent the Elite from manually piloting using full key touch, so you could have just killed her. As long as she's still alive, she can always use a derivative Object to return to the battlefield. The Information Alliance hadn't raised the white flag yet, so you could have done it , right?"

"Should you really be saying that?" Quenser sighed. "After blowing up several Objects, I'm not really one to talk, but this is Alaska. Don't tell me you forget what happened here."

"Heh heh. True enough. Humans really aren't fair. We complain like hell when someone does it to us, but forget all about that when we're the ones doing it."

"Please, just keep this a secret from the princess and Froleytia."

"Because they'll be mad at you for going against military regulations for something like that? The princess seems calm at first glance, but she does have a bad habit of being oversensitive when it comes to wins or losses against Objects, doesn't she?"

"No, because it would probably put them in a bad mood. I'd rather not be ordered to make a 30 kilometer dash through the snow."

"Heh heh. Shouldn't you be more worried about the bad mood the princess is already in? When you were getting along surprisingly well with the Rush's Elite, you said some rather explosive things. She seems quite agitated wondering who this Angelina childhood friend and Etta from the restaurant are."

"Hah? I was just pointing you to the Angelina List!! You followed my instructions, so surely you figured that out, Heivia!"

"Eh? It's not my problem if she didn't catch on."

"Why does it look like I'm going to have to explain myself to the princess after all this…?" muttered Quenser.

Ignoring him, Heivia cut off the transmission.

Amid the silence, Quenser looked up at the ceiling of the Rush's cockpit. He thought back to what he had said.

The next time we meet, we'll be enemies.

We'll be forced to fight to the death.

Chapter 2: A Coal Mine that Scatters Stacks of Cash >> Nighttime Surprise Blitzkrieg on the Kamchatka Peninsula

Part 1

The CSMilitary Channel!!

"This is Monica, your battlefield idol reporter who can both sing and kill! Today, I have come to the Legitimacy Kingdom military's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion!! Today's theme is the women who work in the militaries of the world!! There was a time when militaries were filled almost exclusively with men as an extension of our history of kings and knights, but that is in the past !! I want to see the true faces of the female commanders and Elites who work on the front lines of modern battlefields!!"

The cute, youthful voice of a girl rang throughout the nighttime maintenance base zone.

"What? What's going on?"

When Heivia stuck his head out from the barracks trailer, he spotted an entertainer who was lit up by powerful lights and surrounded by cameras.

"…A comsat broadcast? What's this battlefield reporter crap? She's speaking as stiffly as some swimsuit idol."

"Oh, Heivia. I thought you would be the type to breathe more heavily the closer you got to someone like that," said Froleytia as she approached on her way back from a cold night walk.

Heivia shrugged.

"It's different when I have to help protect them. Should we really let them do that? We're planning this night mission, but they 're shining those lights everywhere."

"Just inside the base. It's not like we're going to let them perform a live broadcast of our invasion. The actual battlefield is a good ways from here. And we have to worry about how people view the military."

"Hah?"

"The media has always been quite powerful. If they can make an amusing show, we might get more new recruits and people might not get so angry about how their tax money is being spent. …Of course, the rookies drawn in by the smile of that swimsuit idol will have no idea how much hard work awaits them."

"I guess it's better than mobilizing to help film an action movie. "

"Exactly." Froleytia put her long, narrow kiseru in her mouth. " And I am about to be interviewed."

"Thanks for everything you do for the military and our nation …"

"Yes. Did you hear what the show's theme is, Heivia? It's about the women working in the military world. Women in the military are so commonplace these days that I have no idea what purpose there is in this."

"I see. Well, I'd rather not get chosen as the example of the worthless male soldier to compare to the wonderful female officer, so I'll be leaving."

"You should really just use who you can and not use who you can't without worrying about whether they're men or women," muttered Froleytia as she cracked her neck. Then she seemed to remember something. "Oh, right. Heivia, the restriction on the caffeine supply is being released in another 2 hours. When the time comes, get everyone in the barracks up and force some painfully hot coffee down their throats."

"…If you don't give proper time for sleep, it'll just make everyone sleepier."

"Let them sleep even if for only 5 minutes more or even just 10 seconds more. Our mission will head straight through the night this time." She grabbed her long, narrow kiseru between two fingers and used it to point into the distant darkness. "A nighttime surprise blitzkrieg. This isn't a mission we can leave to tired eyes."

Part 2

Meanwhile, Quenser was in the Baby Magnum's maintenance area.

The old maintenance lady was making preliminary preparations and Quenser was studying the Object, but then Quenser frowned at a noise from outside the maintenance area.

"…Is something going on out there?"

"Froleytia said they were filming a television show," answered the Elite princess.

In preparation for the nighttime mission, most of the soldiers who did not have guard duty had gone to sleep early. However, the old lady and the other maintenance soldiers had to work to prepare the Object in time rather than rest. But the maintenance soldiers would have a chance to relax once the mission began and the Object left, so it was not necessary to regulate their sleep time.

Speaking of which…

"You're the most important part of this nighttime mission, princess. Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

"I will be fine. Also, I am most relaxed when sitting in the cockpit seat."

"Is that so?" muttered Quenser.

Quenser could not imagine what a pilot like her would look like sleeping. The only image that came to mind was her lying down while still wearing that special suit of hers.

"…Shouldn't you be sleeping, Quenser?"

"Technically, I'm a student rather than a proper soldier. Apparently, I won't be sent to the front lines of a delicate blitzkrieg like this. I'll still be sent to the battlefield for logistical support, but it isn't something I need to be too focused for."

The old maintenance lady then clanked a wrench against the handrail.

"Really, now. Whether you're on the front lines or in a safe country, a bullet will kill you just as dead. You shouldn't let your guard down so long as you're in a war."

"Yeah, but there's a risk of your heart stopping even when you masturbate. It's rare, but it happens. Thinking too much about that kind of thing isn't going to help."

"Masturbate?" said the princess in puzzlement, but Quenser looked down at his handheld device to check on the status of the motors that opened and closed the barriers.

He was standing at a point near the upper surface of the Object. Bright sparks were flying from some welding on a level lower than him.

"This monstrous weapon can withstand a nuclear strike, but its armor is put on with normal welding and bolts, isn't it?"

"Maintaining its strength is important, but it's also necessary to make sure quick maintenance can be carried out on the battlefield.

Apparently, even racecar pit stops are used as experimental grounds for Object designs. …I'm sure you learned that well enough in the Alaska district before, didn't you, boy?"

With that comment, the old maintenance lady sent an email to Quenser's handheld device over the local network. The message notification covered up the maintenance diagram.

Quenser looked up, but the old lady shook her head and went back to work. She was telling him to read the email for details.

He opened the message and found a list of various materials with numbers next to them. The primary item on the list was welding gas. She seemed to be telling him to get the materials they were lacking.

【"…Tch. Why do they always give me odd jobs that have nothing to do with Object design?"

"Did you say something, boy?"

"What point was there in the email!? You were close enough to just tell me!!"

Still grumbling, Quenser finished with what he was doing and headed for the staircase attached to the scaffolding. Partway there, he noticed the princess's shoulders were trembling.

"…Quenser, you exchanged email addresses with the old lady?"

"Why are you looking at me like I'm some kind of indiscriminate beast?" asked Quenser.

He then added, "You're the only one I love, baby," but she turned away and headed back for the cockpit. It seemed he had been rejected. His luck that day was so poor he felt like he would hit the bartender's prized cactus if he tried to play darts in a bar.

He headed for ground level using the staircase that circled around again and again. This seemed a silly way to get up and down since the Object was over 50 meters tall, but a battlefield student like Quenser did not have the authority to use the elevator. He had grown to hate more athletic people.

The maintenance area was pretty chilly, but a blast of cold air stabbed at him when he opened the door.

Quenser contemplated just staying in the maintenance area, but he had no choice but to head crying out into the cold when he saw the hate-filled gazes he was getting that seemed to be saying, "Just get out and close the door!! You're getting us cold, too!!"

He checked the list of materials as he walked along.

(…Ugh, this is too much to take in one trip. Maybe I should get a battlefield license like Heivia has. Then I could use a military tractor.)

The problem was that any time spent on that would be better spent studying Object design.

(Also, that old woman works people too hard. If I got a license, I bet she'd just shove more odd jobs on me. Maybe the easier-sounding option is actually more dangerous.)

As Quenser trudged through the thick snow on his way to the storehouse, he wondered if a sled would work better than a dolly. In fact, the storehouse was constructed atop a large vehicle itself, so he truly wished it could just be brought to him.

But suddenly…

"You there."

Someone called out to him.

Quenser turned around and found a woman in a military uniform approaching him. She was in her early twenties. He did not recognize her. She had glossy brown hair that was contrasted by her skin which was white as snow. More than 800 people belonged to the battalion, so it was not surprising to run across someone you did not know. However, this woman was still odd.

Her uniform was different.

While Quenser's uniform was based on a camouflage matched to the environment, the woman's was a luxurious uniform of primarily black with gold hemming. Her rimless glasses gave an intelligent impression, but she had an odd air of intimidation that went beyond a mere intellectual. Below, she wore a tight black skirt, but it seemed to be primarily for decoration. She wore tights so thick they were not much different from pants. She had medals

and decorations Quenser did not recognize on her bountiful chest. She was clearly someone important from first glance, but it also seemed that someone that glittered that much would get shot right away on an actual battlefield.

She had a rank insignia on her collar, but the plate was dyed red for some reason.

The woman brought both her white-glove-covered hands to her mouth and breathed her white breath on them as she stood before Quenser. Her uniform was intimidating, but that feminine action managed to shine through.

Quenser was completely taken aback, so he just gave voice to his first impression.

"Um…Are you a noble?"

"No, I am a commoner. That has given me various difficulties. But you are the one that matters here. I assume you do not mind if I ask you a few questions."

"No…"

"Let me confirm something. All soldiers with the exception of the guards, the official members of the Baby Magnum's maintenance team, and the pilot Elite herself are to be on standby in the barracks. I believe you were ordered to get as much sleep as possible before the pre-mission briefing in two hours."

"Y-yes!?"

(Oh, crap! She's the strict class president type!!)

Quenser put himself on maximum guard. He had been helping out with the Object's maintenance, but he was not an "official member" of the maintenance team. He was a battlefield student and his technical designation was "combat engineer".

"No, um!! I'm sorry!! But I was requested to bring in these materials for the maintenance soldiers! Once I finish that, I will head to the barracks!!"

"What is your unit and rank?"

"…Eh?"

Quenser raised a questioning voice, but not because he had not understood what she meant. It was because the woman in the black uniform had approached close enough to kiss him and had drawn a ceremonial revolver from her waist at some point. Quenser then felt something hard press against his stomach.

With a slight smile, the woman asked once more.

"What is your unit and rank?"

At that moment, Quenser spotted the unit insignia on the woman's shoulder. It was different from Quenser's.

That meant…

(She clearly isn't part of our unit! Wait…I'm always gotten by with just saying I'm a student, but what's my technical rank!? I

remember there being some kind of pain-in-the-ass term written on the official documents, but if I get this wrong…bang!!)

Quenser started to panic.

Despite the gun being a double action so she could simply pull the trigger, the woman used her thumb to raise the hammer, making an obvious metallic click.

With a strangely calm voice, she said, "Your unit and rank."

"I-I'm a student! A battlefield student! I know I'm designated as a combat engineer, but it's a bit unclear what unit in the battalion I actually belong to! Sometimes Heivia and I make the old maintenance lady mad so she lectures us!!"

Quenser's confused answer made it seem he had a death wish, but the woman in the black uniform clicked her tongue and stepped away like a carnivorous beast that had lost its prey.

"A student, hm? Too bad. Then you aren't under my jurisdiction."

"?"

The woman in the black uniform purposefully aimed the gun at Quenser once more and slowly lowered the revolver's hammer with her thumb.

"Bang," she muttered jokingly. "My barrier duty is meant for the proper soldiers."

Part 3

"Hey, Quenser. I heard you were taken out by some lovely lady in a black uniform."

"I was walking along at night and she suddenly stuck an old-fashioned revolver into my gut and asked me for my unit and rank. It makes me wonder if she's related to the Kuchisake Lady from the Japanese islands. Heivia, what is barrier duty?"

While soldiers gathered for the pre-mission briefing, Quenser and Heivia sipped at an aromaless black drink solely meant to wake them up. Quenser seriously thought the coffee they were given was worse than fast food coffee.

Heivia pushed his cup aside and said, "Barrier duty was originally to prevent soldiers from retreating from a battle, but the meaning has changed over time. In the modern Legitimacy Kingdom military, it entails being something like the supervisor of the battlefield. In other words, those with barrier duty watch over us. They check over everything to ensure the soldiers aren't committing crimes, the prisoners are being treated well, and that no problems crop up during missions."

"Watch over us? But we already have a military police unit here ."

"An external third party exists in case those MPs go out of control."

"I see. So it's unlikely she'll be kind like a young woman acting as a dorm manager."

"Those in black uniforms come from an independent agency at the center of the Legitimacy Kingdom military that have the right to carry out their barrier duty within any unit whenever they want . They have the right to take emergency measures if the offender does not obey their restraint order. …What you experienced was one of those emergency measures."

"…You can clearly take a broad interpretation of that right."

"However, there *is* a need for them. Wars are left to Objects these days. The soldiers often have nothing to do, so there is plenty of opportunity for problems to arise in and outside the base. Under certain circumstances, those in the black uniforms have the ridiculous right to restrain anyone regardless of rank, but it only applies to official soldiers and unofficial combat personnel brought into the battlefield. You're only a safe country student who just so happens to know how to use explosives, so you end up counting as a civilian. You just barely manage to slip out from under their jurisdiction."

"So I'm a civilian who just so happens to be sent out on to the battlefield and just so happens to destroy Objects, hm?"

"Don't be like that. I'm jealous. I woke up from a shallow sleep and all of a sudden there are black uniforms everywhere. Those uniforms are blacker than this nasty coffee. We're all on edge, but you get a free pass. Hey, how about you test it out by going over

and flipping up that strait-laced woman's skirt. If you apologize, I bet she'll forgive you."

"Don't joke. I'd rather not get shot and have it treated as an ' accident' in the course of her barrier duty." Quenser grimaced at the coffee that was so bitter it seemed to close up his throat. "But what did Froleytia do to warrant sending in this unit from the home country?"

"Actually, I wonder if we're completely blameless when it comes to why they're here…"

As the two boys spoke, their large-breasted commander headed to the stage up front.

While operating the projector with a remote control, she said, " Soldiers, thank you for filling yourselves with caffeine this late on such a cold night for something other than waiting up for Santa Claus. I will now begin the pre-mission briefing."

Heivia frowned at Froleytia's slightly stiff voice.

【"Ahn? What's with her? She's started some odd lip service all of a sudden. Her usual sharp edge and impeccable timing are missing. I didn't take her for the type to get nervous at this kind of briefing."

【"Heivia, Heivia. Look over at the back right edge of the room. It's hard to see because it's so small, but that's a CS TV camera."

【"What a pain in the ass!! I thought she liked to stand out, so why is she not acting like herself here!?"

【"The military show this will be part of acts as a form of propaganda to get more recruits and to get the people to understand what their taxes are going to. She would probably rather be doing this as her normal self, but she has to think about the image of the military. Look, you can see the corner of her mouth twitching."

【"Well, I'll admit showing a beauty will probably be more effective than some filthy old man."

The fact that Froleytia was at her limit seemed to infect everyone in the area because an unnatural number of hands shot up when she asked "Any questions!?" with a sharp look in her eyes. It looked like a scene from an elementary school math lesson.

With a bitter smile, Heivia whispered, 【"Heh heh. It looks like she's stuck. Hey, Quenser, how about we show off just how good we are with the ladies by rescuing her here? If we're lucky, we can get her to tread on us in the good way later."

【"You say that, but you're just going to ask her if she's on her period or something else that qualifies as sexual harassment to see how she reacts on camera. I'm going to actually save her."

After the first round of questions was over, Quenser raised a hand.

"I looked through the given materials, but I would like to make sure we are all on the same page. Any discrepancies in interpretation could lead to unnecessary risks during the mission. It may be a bother for you, but could you explain the mission step by step?"

"Yes," nodded Froleytia. With the flow of questions cut off, the silver-haired, large-breasted commander regained her usual form. "Our mission is to attack a military coal mine on the east coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula which is run by the Faith Organization."

With their commander back on her usual form, Heivia asked Quenser a question.

【"What was that about having looked through the given materials?"

【"Some lies are justified."

"Our intelligence department has discovered that this military coal mine is used to mine the fuel used by the JPlevelMHD reactors used in Objects. By destroying it, we can indirectly stop the movements of the entire Faith Organization military to a certain extent."

The reactors used artificial plasma to generate electricity, but a surprising report said that manufacturing old fashioned coal was more efficient than modern fossil fuels such as oil and natural gas.

"Incidentally, they have begun to notice our presence here and have dispatched a Second Generation Object ahead of time. We had hoped to take out the coal mine before it arrived, but the intelligence agents failed in that regard."

"What do we know about their Object?" asked Quenser.

Froleytia used the projector's remote control to display a giant video behind her.

"We managed to secretly get footage of this Faith Organization Object fighting an Information Alliance Object three months ago. We have dubbed it the Wing Balancer. Its main cannon is a coilgun with a small caliber that seems mismatched to its large size. It is most likely the 'small, sharp, and fast' type. It has a long range and high accuracy, so it can steadily apply damage. It is a Second Generation Object that is based on an air cushion engine and has full functionality on both water and land without exchanging parts . You can read the specifics of its estimated specs in the documentation, but let me say this: it is powerful. It is not an opponent we can just send the Baby Magnum up against." The commander used her slender fingers to operate the projector's remote control and a giant map appeared on the screen behind her. "The battlefield will be on the east coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula. Due to their fourth submarine base construction plan and a large scale earthquake in the Bering Sea, 150 kilometers of the coastline has been transformed into a giant ria coast that stretches about 90 kilometers inland. …Basically, cliffs stretch throughout the battlefield like spider webs. Since our princess needs to put on or take off her float when moving between water and land, this is not good terrain for her. Normal cliffs could be flattened with the Object's cannons, but this ria coast was created by carving out the ocean surface for submarines, so even destroying the cliffs may not be enough to fill in the area below," said Froleytia. "Also, the Faith Organization has installed large radars in various places along the ria coast. We believe they are used to greatly improve the targeting accuracy of the Wing

Balancer. If the princess challenges them on a terrain she cannot move across easily and when they have targeting assistance, she will likely be destroyed."

Froleytia changed what the projector was displaying.

Red dots indicating the locations of the radar facilities and other places were added to the map.

"So before the princess battles the Wing Balancer, we will secretly deal with those radars. By adding in a program we have prepared, the targeting correction data sent to the Object will be altered. In other words, we are recalibrating it to make targeting difficult. If this succeeds, the princess should be able to easily defeat the Wing Balancer."

"What if the Wing Balancer notices the abnormality and switches over to running without the assistance of the radar facilities?" asked Heivia.

Froleytia lightly replied, "The system is on such a great scale that it cannot just be switched on and off like a fluorescent lamp. As long as it takes a minute or two to switch over, we'll be fine. I can't have you taking our princess's accuracy lightly."

"We're going to need soldiers moving on foot in secret for this, right?"

"Yes. Two teams." Froleytia used the remote control to add two arrows to the map. "One will head to the base of the data cable that governs all of the various radar facilities to add in the

interference program. On the way there, this team must slip past the surveillance network made up of a group of UAVs swarming around like bees. I'll be honest. If that was a simple task, this would be a much easier mission."

"UAVs…Unmanned aerial vehicles…"

"Basically, they are expensive remote control airplanes with cameras attached. That group of UAVs must be neutralized before we can head for the data cable. The UAVs patrolling the east coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula fly autonomously according to a program. However, once every 30 minutes, a trajectory correction program is sent to provide slight alterations for their flight path. It is similar to the calibration of radio clock. This is necessary because a good number of them fly between the cliffs. If left to their own devices, a slight error could lead them to crash into one of the cliff walls. These UAVs cost 50,000 euros each. The enemy's desire to avoid losing any of them has created an opening for us."

"So we use a radio signal to send a disruptive program into the UAV control network?"

"Point 2. This is the farthest out point. First, we will infect a single UAV that comes out this far. But you might be noticed if you transmit for longer than 150 seconds, so be careful. The program will then spread to the control facility when the UAV accesses it via radio signal. From there, it will quickly spread to every UAV defending the east coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula. After we have secretly taken control of all their systems, we can alter all their data at once."

"So will the enemy in the base be stuck watching an endlessly looping recording? That's the standard method," said Heivia in amusement.

Froleytia brought a simple chart up onto the screen.

"I will now go over the order of events. First, Interference Program A will be sent to a UAV at Point 2 on the coast, neutralizing the surveillance network. Next, a small unit will head inland to Point 1. There, they will dig up the buried data cable that governs the large radar facilities and add in Interference Program B. This will let us use their targeting assistance against the Wing Balancer. Once the effects show themselves, we will finish by having the princess head out at full speed to attack. If she passes over the hill along the long and narrow Route 3 that lies between two cliffs, she can get within firing range of the Wing Balancer in a straight line. If the enemy's targeting was working properly, she would definitely be hit by return fire from that position. Once she is within firing range of the target, she will blow away the Faith Organization's Second Generation Object. Afterwards, we will send a recommendation of surrender to the coal mine. After giving them 900 seconds with which to evacuate all personnel, the Object's firepower will be used to destroy it. …If all goes according to schedule, we will be shooting each other with water guns filled with champagne by dawn."

【"Wow, so are the fridges already filled with ice-cold alcohol?"

"However," added Froleytia, striking down the excitement that had begun to well up among the soldiers. "If the UAVs spot us before the Wing Balancer's targeting assistance has been dealt with

, it is all over. Even if you shoot it down, the enemy will still learn what is going on. The Faith Organization UAVs each have two free-fall bombs installed, but do not attack them even if they fly right up to you. If anything is detected, the Wing Balancer will head out at once. And you will not be able to call in reinforcements from us. After all, it is highly unlikely the princess can win in a frontal assault. We cannot come to rescue you."

Froleytia had the projector now display the state of things in the ocean near the Kamchatka Peninsula.

"The 24th Mobile Maintenance Battalion of the Legitimacy Kingdom military and its Second Generation Object, the Indigo Plasma, will be deploying on the ocean east of the peninsula as a dummy force. The Wing Balancer will be sitting there glaring at the Indigo Plasma. We have only one chance at this. If you are spotted, assume that not even your bones will make it back to the home country. When you fail in a surprise attack, odds are good the enemy will ignore the white flag. Their anger tends to get the better of them. Any questions?"

With that clear ending, Froleytia only received silence in response.

Amid that silence, Quenser raised his hand.

"We have two Objects while they have only one, right? … Couldn't we just overpower them?"

"Not if the link with the radar facilities is working. In this case, it is the special terrain and attached facilities that are providing the

Object's strength rather than the intrinsic abilities of the Object itself. Don't count on the Indigo Plasma. If it becomes clear we have failed and the situation worsens, it and its battalion will head out to sea to keep losses to a minimum. I doubt they will consider the loss of a valuable Generation Two Object worth buying us time to retreat. It's one of those 'wise decisions' that are such a god damn pain in the ass."

"This is being recorded," pointed out Quenser and Froleytia cleared her throat before continuing.

"Do you understand just how dangerous our situation is now?"

Part 4

The area was covered in pure darkness.

As the operation hinged on a surprise attack, not even a single penlight was allowed.

Out of fears that infrared rays or electromagnetic waves would be detected by the UAVs, the correction features in the rifle scopes had been limited.

Amid it all, a few light footsteps could be heard.

They were from Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers.

They continued through the darkness while occasionally peering through their rifle scopes to check on the terrain with the electronically enhanced images.

"This is wrong. This just isn't right," muttered Heivia, one of the soldiers wrapped in heavy coats to protect themselves from the cold of the nighttime blizzard.

However, the usual response did not come as Quenser was not with him. In the other boy's place, the Asian girl walking next to him spoke with her breath coming out white.

"What is?"

"Well, Myonri, I was sent out to the front lines where it's most dangerous while that bastard Quenser gets to stay back on standby ."

"It does seem Miss Froleytia Capistrano wanted to send Quenser along with us," said a large black man.

He was carrying a large piece of communications equipment on his back. The device was being used to send short range radio signals over long distances using directional ultrasonic waves. This was simply so those signals would not be intercepted by the enemy UAVs.

"But those Black Uniforms are hanging around. Quenser is technically a civilian, so she can't exactly send him to the front lines," continued the man.

"Cookman's right. And it isn't like he is just sitting around at the base," cut in the Asian girl named Myonri. "He is headed for Point 2 where the Faith Organization UAVs will be neutralized."

"You just don't understand how the world works, Myonri. Him having even the slightest bit of a better time than me is criminal," said Heivia while pouting.

A white girl with a brown ponytail and freckles turned toward him.

"Oh, are you lonely without your usual partner?"

"Shut up, Westy. Why are you always trying to put two guys together? That isn't the natural way for living things."

"Heivia, you wouldn't say no if it was two girls though, would you?"

"It would still be pointless unless they both had a thing for me."

Those four were the soldiers headed to Point 1 to sabotage the information network made up of large radar facilities.

Heivia, Myonri, Cookman, and Westy. Except for Cookman who was the oldest, they were all teenagers. With a bitter smile, Cookman had called himself the "leading teacher".

They were walking across a damp rocky area.

A blizzard was blowing around them, but the heat from the coal mine below the ground poured out through exhaust ducts located here and there. Thanks to that, areas of melted snow dotted the terrain. Heivia and the others were travelling from melted area to melted area to avoid as much snow as possible.

"Not leaving any footprints is nothing more than a suggestion," said Cookman. "If you focus too much on the ground and let your guard down, it will all be for naught. Luckily, the weather will cover up any footprints before long anyway."

"I'm worried about visibility," said Westy as she peered across the battlefield that was divided into white areas and black areas. " There's nothing at all as far as the eye can see. The ups and downs of the ground itself are the only things here to provide cover. Don't coal mines usually have buildings? This is nothing more than large dumping sites for dirt being carried out."

"The facility has likely been kept underground as much as possible."

"Why?"

"This mine was created using a submarine base construction plan. They might have been doubling it as an experiment in constructing military facilities below ground."

"This terrain is something else," said Heivia.

It was unclear if Heivia had been listening to Cookman and Westy's conversation, but he was now staring down into the darkness off of a cliff.

It was 10 meters to the ocean surface and about 20 meters to the opposite cliff. The only trace of the submarine base was the depth of the water.

If they fell off, they would be killed.

And it was not just the height that made Heivia think that. Due to the cold, the ocean surface was covered in thick ice. The ice had cracked apart either due to the waves or ships passing through, but each individual piece of ice looked large enough to allow a polar bear to lie on it without it sinking. The ice was much too thick to simply "soften the blow" of landing in the water.

"Areas like this stretch for 150 kilometers along the coast and 90 kilometers inland. It's like a giant spider web. Human technology is amazing."

"A lot of rumors had started after they went through four different outdated submarine base construction plans. Some people claimed the Faith Organization was creating a large scale base to house a supply unit for a supposed submarine Object they could be creating," said Myonri.

Westy cut in to say, "But what we found was a bunch of coal. No amount of dirt being brought up is suspicious in the construction of a submarine base. And since submarine bases are so outdated, the other world powers did not consider it worth attacking. It functioned as nice camouflage, I'll give them that."

"But now the Legitimacy Kingdom is heading out to destroy the mine."

"That might be thanks to things calming down in Alaska. It is true that being able to construct a steady supply line over the Bering Sea allows us to carry out a large scale invasion on the Kamchatka Peninsula."

"Which means the higher ups might be intending to stay here awhile even after shutting down that military coal mine. Dammit, so that's why we had to use such a complicated strategy."

"Speaking of complicated, won't this complicated terrain make it difficult for even the Wing Balancer to move around?"

"I don't know," replied Cookman as he adjusted the shoulder straps for the communications equipment on his back. "We don't know any details about the enemy Object. It might have some bridge building device stored in those long legs that it can use to cross between cliffs."

"Ahn? That wasn't in the data on its estimated specs."

"The data from the intelligence department and the results from the electronic simulation department aren't everything. We must keep in mind that it can always have some hidden ability that defies imagination until we have actually fought it ourselves."

"Is that so?" muttered Heivia as he looked around. "So what are we going to do, boss? We have to get across to the other cliff to continue on."

"According to the map, there is a suspension bridge 3 kilometers north of here," suggested Westy.

"They will have some sort of surveillance set up for the few routes you can use to get through. Just a single camera can provide quite a bit of safety. We are much less likely to be spotted if we head through an area far away from where they expect."

As he spoke, Cookman gestured toward Myonri. She set down what she was carrying.

"…Are you serious? A deflated rubber boat?"

"Climbing down, crossing the sea, and climbing back up is the simplest method of getting to the other cliff, don't you think?"

Part 5

Quenser was walking through an area 5 kilometers away from Heivia and his group.

"Wow, you can see the aurora. Not that it matters to a design student like me. Wouldn't this be more suited to a student working to be an environmental scientist?"

"Quit complaining about every little thing, you giant-obsessed freak. Learning about the harshness of extreme environments can help you when you're 'having fun' designing. You won't have to worry about looking stupid when the cold prevents the plasma gas from flowing properly."

That overly-familiar response came from a black boy. His language could be crass, but his enunciation was oddly precise. Unlike Quenser, he had an interest in smaller machines, and he was carrying an unmanned reconnaissance vehicle (basically a radio-controlled vehicle with a camera attached) on his back.

Quenser replied in disgust, "Nutley, I can learn about extreme environments just fine in a safe country fridge. We had a big one back at my school. We used it for material experiments and raised a seal."

"You're just making excuses. The key to happiness in life is to find a way to take in everything you need regardless of the situation."

"You're the kind of person that I could see drinking tequila at any time. Hey, Charles, aren't you sick of trudging through this freezing snow? …Charles?"

Upon receiving no response, Quenser turned around. A skinny white boy was standing there. He was hanging his head down and was not speaking a single word. When he noticed Quenser looking at him, he turned his downward-cast head to the side to further escape.

"Don't expect anything from him. He's not usually like this, but this always happens when he gets homesick. It makes me want to hang a chemical dehumidifier from his neck," said the black boy called Nutley with a shrug. He must have been close to Charles because he did not hesitate to say that. "But he isn't a bad person. His specialty is Object communications software. He was involved

in making this interference program. His hacking skills are better than anyone in the electronic simulation department. He can't do anything other than that, though. Our victory here is half dependent on that clammy intellectual."

Quenser, Nutley, and Charles.

Quenser sighed as he recalled the makeup of their team.

"This isn't normal. Why was the core of this military operation given to some battlefield students?"

"I said this mission is reliant on Charles's interference program, remember? The team needed to be made up of those who could best let Charles work. The thing is, Charles is clammy and shy. He' ll be less nervous surrounded by students, and that gives us higher odds of success."

"Yeah, but we're basically a collection of amateurs, myself included. What is our commander planning to do if we get taken out right away?"

"That's probably why she sent that cool student council president with us."

In response to Nutley's comment, Quenser timidly turned his head to look behind him. A bit away was a woman with brown hair who was wearing a black coat and carrying a large radio.

"…I somehow doubt she'll bail us out if we get in trouble."

"She'll do more than those fat asses lazily guarding the maintenance base zone, I'll bet. Froleytia's no idiot. She actually tries to use the right people for the job."

"Are you sure…?"

Quenser glanced back at the Black Uniform, but Nutley seemed to be enjoying himself.

"The student council president's name is Charlotte. Once she finishes with her barrier duty, she'll be leaving. I need to try to get her into bed before then. I hear she's a commoner, so I don't have to worry about her being bound by any pain-in-the-ass family issues," said Nutley, completely at his own pace.

Quenser decided he must be the type who tries hitting on a lot of people in the off chance of succeeding.

"A battlefield student doesn't have infinite time. If you do things like that, you won't be able to gain any practical skills," warned Quenser.

"I can just extend the time I spend here if necessary. Happiness comes first, right? Nothing will stick in my head if I'm not happy. And what are you so impatient about anyway? You're hoping to become a designer, right? Do you want to be rich that badly?"

"Yes. When I was a kid, a famous noble family lived nearby. The blonde daughter of that family was horribly selfish and annoying," muttered Quenser. "One day, her family went

bankrupt. They had such a great foundation. Their huge mansion had seemed like it would remain unscathed even if the entire city was bombed. And yet seemingly overnight, such a powerful noble family was left with nothing but debt. They were not exactly well-liked. Even their servants tried to hunt that girl's family down . A strange atmosphere came over the entire city. If my father hadn 't sheltered them, that selfish and annoying girl and her mother could very well have been gang raped."

"Well, your father sounds like a great guy. I hope to be someone like him."

"Even a famous noble family completely collapsed," continued Quenser while ignoring Nutley's offhand comment. "I can still see it vividly in my mind's eye. Those nobles who had always been so domineering were gathered together trembling in the cheese storehouse of a small commoner family. …How much money do you need to have a solid foundation? If not even nobles can have a truly solid foundation, can a commoner gain one with normal work? I decided a special route would be necessary. I decided becoming an Object designer was the only route left."

"I see." Nutley took a step away from Quenser and gave a sign to Charles with a gesture. "Then let's all work as battlefield students towards getting rich as soon as possible. Charles! We're almost at Point 2. I'll help you set up the transmission antenna."

Quenser looked at Nutley's back as the boy headed off, but they really had nothing else to do. Just as Quenser was about to go help Charles too, the Black Uniform named Charlotte called out to him.

"You."

"Yes?"

"I could not help but overhear what you were just saying."

"Were we not supposed to be having a private conversation?"

"That is not what I meant."

"Was the topic unacceptable?"

"I do understand why you would want to quickly build up a solid foundation, but I get the feeling that your father has a different sort of unshakeable quality to him."

The businesslike stiffness had somewhat left Charlotte's voice.

As she was human it should have been obvious, but it appeared she did indeed have the ability to just chat.

"That's because you don't know the situation he is in. My father is just a white collar worker. Even a slight change in the economic situation could lead to him being fired. He's always bowing down to his bosses. And it doesn't matter if he might survive a round of layoffs, if the entire company goes under. That's how life is for those whose bloodline does not help their social standing."

"But even in that situation, he reached out his hand to help those bankrupt nobles. He sounds like a wonderful father. If he

ever does lose his job, tell him to contact Charlotte Zoom. I know of some lines of work that are suited towards someone of his character."

(It seems my father has gotten a rare long distance boost in popularity. Unfortunately, he has the double issue of being too old and being a father. As a member of his family, I truly hope he can keep on his feet.)

"What happened to those bankrupt nobles afterwards?"

"They contacted the Lineage Department, had their IDs changed, and got a fresh start. We couldn't have them living in our cheese storehouse forever, after all. If I recall, that selfish and annoying daughter became an idol."

"Quenser!" shouted Nutley.

It seemed they had finished setting up the transmission antenna . An antenna as large as an open suitcase was spread out at Charles's feet.

Quenser and Charlotte approached Nutley and Charles.

"Is there anything for us to do?" asked Quenser.

"Take this," said Nutley as he tossed a pair of night vision binoculars to Quenser. "We have to transmit the data from a position where the UAV can't see us. Charles has to use the

antenna to transmit the interference program, so he will not be able to tell where the UAV is. That means someone has to follow the location of the flying target."

"And that's me?"

"I set up the antenna. Charles will be transmitting the data. So who does that leave for the last job? I think you'd be getting a little too much happiness if you left that to the Black Uniform lady and headed back without doing anything."

"Fine, fine. Dammit. I'll be in the place most easily spotted by the UAV. That means I have the most dangerous job."

"No," cut in Charlotte. "There is no reason for me to do nothing . I will go with you. …You seem too inexperienced to me. I would prefer not to have a bomb dropped on me because we left this to you and you got spotted."

【"Quenser, if you two head off and things start getting a little steamy, call me over. It's cold here, and you'll keep your warmth better with more people."

"If you were a proper soldier, that comment would be enough to get you shot," commented Charlotte.

They were currently located behind a low hill. The Faith Organization UAV would not be coming that far, so the hill hid them well enough. However, they could not see the UAV's location from there. To remedy that, Quenser and Charlotte crawled up to the top of the hill to use the binoculars to check on

the UAV's location while remaining as hidden as possible. Charles would transmit the interference program using a direction and output strength based on their information.

If only a portion of the signal arrived, the program could be damaged when it entered the UAV. That would make the entire operation a dud. The location of the UAV was crucial information.

If they were spotted, it was all over as well.

Quenser was incredibly nervous as he stuck his head out on the hill, but Charlotte said, "Do not get so tense. The UAV's expected route passes by 3 kilometers from here. If we stay still, it will not notice us in this blizzard. And our insulated coats will prevent the infrared sensors from easily spotting us. The UAV's path here is up in the sky rather than between the cliffs. The sense of distance when looking up from the ground is quite different from when you are looking down from the sky."

"If you say so."

"I see something NNW. Check it with the binoculars."

In shock, Quenser looked through the night vision, but it was just a large bird.

"That's an eagle, I think."

"Beyond it. I see something else. Eagles are not nocturnal, so it may have been the noise of the UAV that woke it up."

"Hmm?"

Quenser frowned as he looked through the binoculars, and then he spotted it. It was a UAV. It had a cylindrical body about 2 meters long with two straight wings stretching out from the side. It looked a bit like a miniature cruise missile, but the propulsion device at the back was a propeller. It must have been designed for flight time rather than speed.

"I've found it. It's 2900 meters NNW of here. It's following the edge of the cliff east at a height of 15 meters. …That design looks horrible. I guess that's what happens when you just focus on functionality."

"The rumor is that they were given such a simple design so that they could be launched with old launcher vehicles. At any rate, let' s tell them its location and finish up our job here. You are not the only one that would rather not be doing work unrelated to his proper field," said Charlotte.

"Okay. Charles, the target is at BC9. It is heading towards BF9 at 150 kph. It's following the edge of the cliff, so we can predict any curves by checking the terrain. Charles?"

While still looking through the binoculars, Quenser assumed he was getting no response due to Charles's homesickness.

But that was not the case.

In the next instant, a burst of gunfire from an assault rifle rang out.

Something was being fired behind Quenser. It was not a Faith Organization weapon. The noise was exactly the same as when Heivia fired his assault rifle. However, Quenser did not have time to turn around. He only managed to move his shoulders slightly. A sharp impact ran through his back along with the gunshots. All the air in his lungs was forced out. The shooter was sweeping the rifle horizontally as he fired. Quenser's upper body had been propped up to look through the binoculars, but he was slammed flat onto the ground and his vision wavered. He forced his head to turn and he realized Charlotte had been shot in the back too.

Neither of them had had time to shout out.

Quenser's consciousness rapidly faded as he tasted blood flowing into his mouth.

Part 6

I'm dead.

That was the sole thought in Charlotte Zoom's mind until she realized someone was shaking her shoulder. She last recalled collapsing face down, but she was now facing up.

(…I see…I was carrying that large piece of radio equipment on my back…)

The attacker had fired from behind. The equipment on her back had prevented the rifle bullet from piercing her soft flesh. Fortunately, the bullet was an anti-personnel bullet that had been designed to remain within the person it hit. A normal rifle bullet

would have had little trouble going straight through a car, much less the communications equipment.

Even so, quite a shock had struck the core of her body.

"Quenser…Are you okay?"

"Yes, thanks to the plastic explosives case I was carrying. But Charles…"

He held a torn off pair of dog tags in his hand. That was enough to tell Charlotte that one of their fellow soldiers had been killed.

"There was one other. He was called Nutley I think… What happened to him?"

"He disappeared," was Quenser's short response. "Only one set of footprints leads away from here. The rifle bullet in my explosives case was a Legitimacy Kingdom bullet. And the Faith Organization primarily uses UAVs. I have never heard anything about them sending out foot soldiers."

"…Tch. I had thought the gunshots sounded oddly nearby. If an enemy soldier had gotten that close, we would have noticed them, and they need not get that close in order to shoot us."

Charlotte got up and checked on the large radio she had been carrying, but it had been completely destroyed. It had saved her life in the place of a bulletproof vest, so it may have been unfair to expect anything else of it.

Quenser stared out across the snow where the footprints headed away.

"I don't know whether he simply deserted in fear or was a Faith Organization spy, but I think we should treat Nutley as guilty here ," said Quenser.

"Whatever his circumstances, he appears to have voluntarily fired on Legitimacy Kingdom troops and is trying to flee to the Faith Organization. That is enough to consider him an enemy spy. …Since he went as far as to kill Charles just before he could transmit the virus, it seems unlikely he was just a child soldier who panicked."

"We have a problem."

"What is it?"

"When Nutley killed Charles, he also destroyed the transmission antenna and the laptop with the interference program on it. We cannot send the interference program to the UAV, so we cannot continue the mission. We need to contact HQ and the unit headed to Point 1 as soon as possible."

"…My radio is currently shooting sparks everywhere."

"My radio can only send long-distance transmissions via yours. That means we have no means of contacting anyone."

"One other thing." Charlotte used both hands to grab the assault rifle hanging from her shoulder. "UAVs are headed this

way because of that gunfire!! A ton of those annoying models with two free-fall bombs are flying over. We will simply get worn down if we try to take them on!! And no matter how many of them we take out, it won't eliminate any of their actual manpower!!"

"Where's that bastard Nutley!? We might be able to find him if we follow his footprints!!"

"No, we need to retreat! We cannot continue this mission. It is too late to chase after him. And even if we think up a way to contact HQ or Point 1, we need to ensure our own safety first! If we are taken out here, we will never be able to report the horrible situation. Also, Nutley might return to the Legitimacy Kingdom military claiming to be the lone survivor! At the very least, we need to report that he is a spy. Do you understand!?"

"Y-yes. But how are we supposed to escape an enemy that is coming from the sky!? Even if these UAVs are low speed, they can still fly at over 100 kph!!"

"Don't worry about that. Luckily, we have a route the UAVs cannot enter. These UAVs need a trajectory correction program to fly between the cliffs, so I doubt they can pull off this kind of dangerous acrobatics."

As she spoke, Charlotte pointed with her gun barrel.

300 meters ahead was…

"An entrance…to the coal mine…?"

Part 7

Heivia and his team conveniently realized that things were not advancing according to plan.

"…Shit, this is bad," groaned Heivia.

All four people there understood the situation without being told.

Danger was approaching before their eyes.

Its form was a giant shadow noticeable even in the darkness.

The countless points of light they could see must have been light waves emitted by the sensors on the ends of the cannons that changed wavelength periodically. Trying to hide in the darkness was not even considered in that weapon's plan and the word " weapon" was all you needed to describe it.

It was…

"Dammit!! Why is the Wing Balancer coming this way!?"

It was a strange-looking machine.

In the center was the 50 meter spherical main body. The propulsion device at the bottom was made up of two giant concentric circles. Around 20 "legs" connected the sphere to the

two concentric circles. The propulsion device was an air cushion that kept the craft afloat with air, so it was unclear what the purpose of the many "legs" was.

For a main cannon, a large coilgun was installed at the front center of the craft. However, its caliber was relatively small. It was likely made to be "small, sharp, and fast" by adding as much acceleration as possible.

In addition to the main cannon powerful enough to pierce through another Object, lasers, rapid fire beam cannons, and other secondary weapons were placed here and there around the sphere. However, with the many "legs" on the lower portion of the sphere, the upper half had a higher concentration of weapons.

Four wing-like objects could be seen on the back of the sphere.

They must have acted as weights to lessen the burden caused during rapid turns.

This was of course not an opponent flesh-and-blood soldiers could hope to defeat.

And the Wing Balancer seemed to realize that. Its many different types of sensors would have located them in an instant, but the Object was not firing on them. It was simply heading straight for them. It was either planning to pass right by them or to crush them as it passed over.

He knew it was pointless, but Heivia leapt behind a nearby rock and then called out to his fellow soldiers.

"Hey, why do you think the Wing Balancer is coming this way!?"

"H-how should I know? Th-the Baby Magnum's maintenance base zone is behind us. …I-it doesn't seem concerned with normal soldiers like us, so what if…what if it's headed for…"

That response had come from the large black man named Cookman. He was hiding behind a different rock.

Myonri had been pulled down to the ground by Westy and she asked a question in a trembling voice

"But wasn't the Faith Organization Object held in place by our Indigo Plasma!? Could it really leave so easily!?"

"Our allies may have already retreated. They may have seen the operation coming apart, so they left. Their excuse will be that they wanted to reduce the losses as much as possible."

(…Dammit, Quenser. Did you fuck it up!?)

Heivia tried to use his radio to complain to the other boy, but he received no reply. It was possible they were having to deal with their own trouble on the other side.

But he did not have time to think about it too deeply. The enemy was not going to wait. The Object had approached within 100 meters of them.

"…What do we do?" muttered Cookman, the oldest one there, with his eyes darting about aimlessly. "Where do we run!? Will running even help!? Its range is just too great, not to mention its power. And those sensors won't let us escape just by hiding behind cover!!"

"Stop it, you idiot!! Don't panic! This may be an enemy that we can't fight normally, but panicking will just lose us precious time! It just makes us more likely to die!!" shouted back Heivia in an attempt to hold Cookman's panic in check.

That large black man was the pillar holding the team together.

If he broke, Myonri and Westy would fall too.

"Think. Let's think. The enemy isn't going to overlook us if we tie a white handkerchief to our rifle barrel and wave it around, so we need to think."

It took a few seconds before Heivia's words really sunk into Cookman's head.

Finally, he nodded.

Heivia breathed a sigh of relief.

(God dammit. Encouraging my teammates and bringing back harmony is not the role I was meant to play.)

"That's right. Let's go over everything we know." Cookman leaned his back up against the rock and pointed forward with one of his thick fingers. "We know that cliff is there."

"What about it? The Object can fire from that distance with perfect accuracy if it tries. Even its smallest cannon can reach us," replied Heivia.

"It clearly isn't trying to target foot soldiers. Since it is still headed this way, it must be planning to directly attack the maintenance base zone behind us."

"Meaning?"

"It can't target the base from here. That means the Object has to get across that cliff to approach the target."

"Get across…?" Heivia repeated in shock, but then a thought entered his mind. "You don't mean the idea of the Wing Balancer having a bridge building device built in, do you?"

"By bridge building device," said Myonri, "do you mean something like those large work vehicles that have a retractable bridge that can be used to allow the convoy to cross a river? I heard they are something like priceless treasures for mobile maintenance base zones like ours."

"Cookman is suggesting that the Wing Balancer has one of those retractable bridges built in. But he has no real proof."

"Well, I doubt it's coming straight this way just to fall off the cliff." Cookman moved his fingers to indicate that Myonri and Westy should get even lower to the ground. "But if it does have a bridge building device, then we just might be able to win."

"You mean interfere during the bridge building process and knock the Object off the cliff?"

"It seems odd for all those 'legs' to be in there so complexly. It's possible those 'legs' themselves are what extend to create the bridge. The bridge building devices we're familiar with are about 60 meters long and take about 5 minutes to complete their work. And during that time, they are completely defenseless."

"But I doubt our puny little guns will do much to an Object," said Westy.

Heivia gave a resigned sigh and said, "While it is extending the bridge building device, its balance will be as bad as someone standing on their tiptoes. He's suggesting we knock it off balance with concentrated fire during that time."

"It isn't viewing us as a threat right now, so this is our last chance. If it finds any reason to be cautious of us, just one shot back at us will finish it."

Hearing Cookman's comment, Heivia put the rifle that used a sling belt over his shoulder and grabbed his handheld antitank missile launcher instead.

Myonri was equipped with a similar missile, but she must not have been used to using it. Myonri's small hands were moving too slowly, so Westy grabbed the missile from her and tossed it to Cookman.

"Pay attention to where its center of gravity is. We both fire on my signal."

"Dammit. No matter who in this unit I get teamed up with, I end up in this kind of danger."

The Wing Balancer approached in order to cross the 20 meter long gap between cliffs with a 10 meter drop to the water. A creaking noise came from the legs joining the main body to the floats.

While still hiding behind the rock, Cookman made a quiet countdown by lightly tapping the body of his missile launcher with his finger.

Three, two, one.

Heivia held his breath and stood up from behind his rock just as Cookman did the same.

But…

They never fired their missiles.

Something unexpected happened first.

The Faith Organization Object did not possess a bridge building device

It had the ability to cross the gap using a simpler method.

With the sound of compressed air being expelled, the giant mass of steel jumped about 150 meters into the air.

What Heivia felt first in that instant was an intense blast of wind. A portion of the compressed air expelled at the Object's feet as it jumped across the gap between cliffs and reached them. Heivia then grimaced as he felt an intense pain like his ear drums were about to burst. It was not just the strength of the wind. He felt like the air pressure itself had greatly changed.

And…

【ウィングバランサー】
WING BALANCER

全長… 120メートル（詳細不明）

最高速度… 時速470キロ

装甲… 4センチ×250層

用途… 局地的防衛用兵器

分類… 完全水陸両用第二世代

運用者… 信心組織

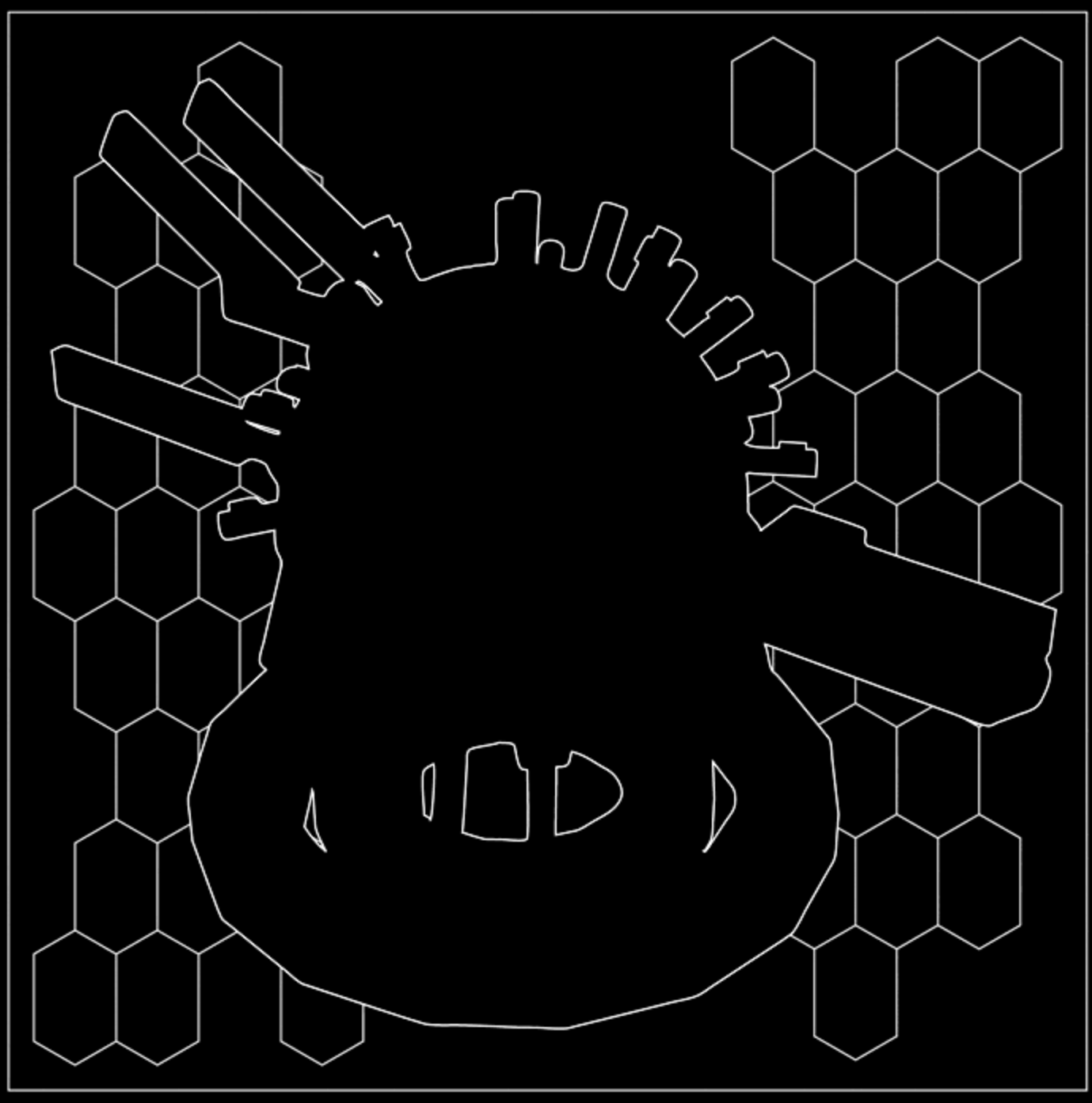
仕様… エアクッション（詳細不明）

主砲… 大規模小口径コイルガン

副砲… 連速ビーム砲など

コードネーム… ウィングバランサー（自国では『アークエンジェル』）

メインカラーリング… ホワイト



WING BALANCER

With his mouth hanging open, Heivia removed his head from the missile's targeting device and simply stared blankly up at the sight. He looked like an outfielder following the path of a ball flying so high it would clearly be a home run.

The 200,000 ton mass flew through a large arc.

The scene was so unrealistic that his thoughts completely stopped.

A change occurred to the airborne Object before his eyes. The propulsion device had looked like two concentric circles, but it was not. The circles were split into about 20 smaller fan-shaped portions similar to pieces of canned pineapple. This truly did split it apart into many different "legs" and each of the countless joints was making slight corrections to match the small ups and downs of the ground.

Cookman was the first to come to his senses.

"Get down!!"

"…Uh…Eh?"

"Its propulsion device is an air cushion! It uses the power of air! ! How much compressed air do you think it needs to use to support something that huge!?"

They did not have time to respond.

Cookman pressed his back against the rock, and Westy and Myonri pressed themselves against the ground. Heivia rolled into a nearby entrance to the coal mine.

Immediately afterwards, the Wing Balancer landed on the other side of the gap…and quite near Heivia and the other three.

Even so, the 200,000 ton mass did not touch the ground. An artificial cushion of air forcibly held it up. However, unlike with a balloon, this air had no walls to contain it. The massive amount of air used in the cushion was crushed down and scattered in every direction.

As a result…

A roaring shockwave-like wind swept away the powerless foot soldiers.

Westy was pressed against the ground, but her body was ripped up and blown 20 meters horizontally. Cookman was hiding behind a rock, but he and the entire rock were dropped off the cliff . Due to hiding in the coal mine, Heivia escaped the main brunt of the violent wind, but a large mass flew into the entrance and struck him, slamming him against the wall. He thought some rock had been torn from the ground, but it turned out to be Myonri.

The Object had not even needed to fire.

The Object was so huge that no offensive weapons had been necessary to kill flesh-and-blood foot soldiers.

(Cookman!! Westy!!)

Heivia clenched his teeth, but he had no intention of leaving the mine. Those two had taken the violent wind full on and had been blown away. They would have been scraped across the ground and covered all over in scratches. Heivia very much doubted they were alive.

Heivia looked around the area.

He was in the entrance of the coal mine, but he saw no sign of a camera.

After checking to make sure the Wing Balancer was not focused on them, Heivia placed his hand on Myonri's limp shoulder.

"Myonri, can you move!? Myonri!!"

"Uuh…uuh…"

Myonri shook her head. At first, Heivia assumed she was feeling woozy, but she was actually crying. Even when Heivia helped her stand, she tried to use her unsteady arms and legs to head for the mine's exit.

She was completely refusing to look at reality.

It was not that she could not understand what was going on. This was not the clean war that the governments of the various countries claimed it to be. Heivia understood the desire to simply cast everything aside and give up out of spite.

But they could not do that.

If they did, only certain death awaited them.

"Please, c'mon. Pull yourself together!! We're still alive! If we flee deeper into the mine, we might survive!!"

"No…I've had enough… We need to go. We need to save everyone."

Myonri's still-unfocused eyes were pointed toward the mine's exit, so Heivia took a bottle of ammonia out of his survival kit. He removed the cap and brought it beneath Myonri's nose. She coughed and finally turned her now-intelligent eyes toward Heivia .

"What about…What about the other two?"

"Please understand, Myonri. They're already…"

"I know that!!" shouted Myonri. "I know that. I am not arguing against something as obvious as that. I am asking about their bodies. We need to at least recover their dog tags."

"If we could, I already would have," said Heivia like he was spitting out the words. He was surprised at how quiet his own voice was. "They still have belongings back at the base. We can likely find some hairs of theirs in the barracks. We don't have time to worry about the dead right now. We need to survive ourselves.

Cookman was the center of our communications ability, but he's gone. Our small radios aren't enough to contact that huge-breasted commander of ours."

"You said we could flee deeper into the mine, but this is a Faith Organization military facility. Even if they primarily use UAVs, there are sure to be human soldiers in the facility."

"Yes."

Heivia tried to force his dried lips into the shape of a smile.

He failed spectacularly.

"But that's 100 times better than heading out to face that Object."

Part 8

Heivia and Myonri headed deeper into the coal mine.

Not far past the entrance was a simple inspection area. It held a railway crossing-like gate for bringing in large equipment and a smaller gate next to it for people to pass through. The gate for people was a simple cube-shaped prefab building. It had a single door on the front and the back.

Heivia and Myonri were cautious, but there was no sign of any guards.

Pure white LED lights illuminated the facility.

"Dammit. I'd actually prefer it if it was pitch black in here. Our shadows stretch further than I would like."

"What is that prefab building?"

"An air curtain facility or something like that, I would assume. Usually, that kind of thing is meant for when you're leaving more than when you're entering."

"To get rid of the dust from the mine?"

"That's the reason they give, but it also lets them check to see if you're trying to sneak any coal out."

"This isn't a gold mine."

As they spoke, Heivia and Myonri climbed over the railway crossing-like gate and headed on.

The tunnel beyond was about 2 meters across and 5 meters tall. For a coal mine, the interior was quite clean and the ceiling, walls, and floor were all coated in a brightly-colored plastic.

They did not even need to use their military flashlights.

LED lights for the workers were set up at even intervals, illuminating the entire tunnel in a dim light.

"What is this plastic on the walls?"

"This area must not have any coal left to mine, so they've covered it all up to prevent any unnecessary dust from getting in. It can damage people's lungs and cause dust explosions."

"How do they know where the deposits are? There could be some other resource sleeping beyond these walls."

"They can tell by using ultrasonic waves. Also, they've made sure they can easily break through and continue mining if a new resource is found. That must be why they used this plastic rather than thick concrete."

"Maybe that is why we can't hear any noises."

"They'll have dug around wherever it was needed, making this place into a labyrinth. The area near the entrance may only be used to go in and out at starting time and quitting time."

The two soldiers hoped that was true.

If they ran across Faith Organization soldiers in that narrow area and a firefight began, they had no chance of winning. The gunshots would draw in more and more enemy soldiers until they were surrounded.

Incidentally…

"This is odd…"

"Yes, we haven't seen a single guard."

"Come to think of it, there wasn't a single camera at the entrance to the mine either. With set routes in like that, they would be able to vastly reduce the possibility of an intruder just by setting up a camera on those routes."

"This *is* a military mine…right?"

"It has to be."

Heivia and Myonri came to a small room.

No one was inside it.

The area likely functioned as a break room for workers. Even if putting the break room far away from the mining area was a bit inconvenient, it may have provided a more comfortable environment by distancing the workers from the noise and dust.

It contained a simple sofa, a refrigerator, a microwave, and other such amenities.

What stood out the most was the poster attached to one wall.

"…This is in the Legitimacy Kingdom language."

"Yes, but the grammar is pretty bad."

"Why would this be in a Faith Organization military coal mine?"

Heivia grabbed something from atop the break room table. It was a dictionary for the Legitimacy Kingdom language. The pages

were well worn and the three side edges other than the spine had turned yellow. It had been read again and again. Bookmarks were placed in quite a few pages and a highlighter had been used to highlight passages.

As he flipped through the pages of the dictionary, Heivia said, " So would this be a spy training camp?"

"Do you really think that?"

"…No, you're right. If their military intelligence department was training spies, they would certainly not teach them to use such broken language."

As he spoke, Heivia peered inside a cardboard box located next to the sofa. It appeared to have been used for some party. It was neatly filled with various types of plastic decorations and a hand-written banner.

When he spread out the banner, it said the following in the same slightly-grammatically-incorrect Legitimacy Kingdom language:

To future friends in Legitimacy Kingdom.

It may not be much, but we hope this can help pay for construction of drinking water well.

"What the hell is this?"

Heivia was legitimately surprised.

He could see no way that text supporting an enemy nation would be allowed in a military coal mine. If that banner had been made out of actual thought for the other nation rather than out of sarcasm or mockery…

"Is this *not* a military mine…?"

"It might actually be a facility belonging to an anti-war group."

Between her thumb and forefinger, Myonri held a publication speaking of peaceful ideas that were far removed from the policy of the Faith Organization military.

"This is no joke. There are three years' worth of remittance records here."

There was a discrepancy in all the information they had.

But…

Where had this discrepancy come from and how had it gotten there?

Part 9

Quenser and Charlotte also displayed puzzled expressions in the underground space.

Charlotte frowned at the LED lights illuminating the tunnel. She did not seem to like how her shadow stretched to the wall.

As they walked along the plastic-covered floor, Quenser asked, "We've gone down quite a ways, haven't we?"

"We have likely descended over 200 meters."

"Please stop that. Hearing the actual number again just makes me feel all the more exhausted."

"I merely answered your question." Charlotte's expression hardly changed. "Most coal mines are a kilometer deep, but some go down as deep as 4 kilometers. This is still just the entrance, so-…"

She trailed off and suddenly froze in place.

Her assault rifle had been hanging from her shoulder on a strap, but she smoothly removed it as if it was part of a wire puzzle and pulled the cocking lever in the same motion. In no time at all, she held it at the ready in both hands.

Quenser heard a rustling noise at about the same time.

Quenser only had bombs, so he had no way of helping. He had no choice but to immediately press his back against the plastic-covered wall so as not to be hit by any rifle bullets.

Just as he did, someone poked their head around a corner of the tunnel.

It was a woman in her early twenties wearing a thick coat suitable for the freezing land.

She was most likely a worker in the coal mine.

There was fear in her expression, but she slowly approached them.

She held something in her hands, but it was not a gun.

(A first-aid kit…?)

Quenser looked confused, but then heard a small metallic noise.

It was the sound of the metal fasteners of the assault rifle's shoulder strap clanking together as she altered her grip on the weapon.

The rifle's barrel was accurately aimed at the center of the female worker's body.

And Charlotte gave no warning.

Without hesitation, her trigger finger moved!!

"…!!"

An unpleasant trembling ran through Quenser's fingertips.

Quenser followed that feeling and immediately jumped for Charlotte's rifle.

"…!! Out of the way, you!!"

With that short command, Quenser's vision spun. He had fallen prey to a form of close quarters combat meant for enemy soldiers trying to steal one's weapon. Quenser did not realize this until his back had already struck the ground. The shock of the impact was enough to make him forget how to breathe.

"Gah…hah…!!"

As Quenser gasped on his back, he saw the female worker finally toss the first-aid kit aside and run away. However, Charlotte showed no mercy. She held her rifle up again before the worker could disappear around the corner.

"Don't!!"

"Silence!!"

Quenser's shout must have messed up her timing slightly because a 5.56mm rifle bullet did not strike the worker in the back.

The worker then managed to disappear around the corner.

Charlotte clicked her tongue and pressed her rifle barrel against the tip of Quenser's nose, pushing him back to the ground just as he had tried to rise.

"Explain yourself."

"…Cough…Th-this may be a military mine, but that worker's clothes, equipment, and even the way she moved made it clear she was no soldier. She was probably brought in as a civilian laborer. If

the mine has 2 or 3 shifts, those types of people would likely be the ones on duty at this time of the night. If she wasn't a civilian, I don 't see why she would have nothing but a first-aid kit in this situation."

"Your point? What proof did you have that there was not a gun inside that kit? And even if she is unarmed, she can still call plenty of other workers in if she reports this. Please do not give me some conceited line about not wanting to turn a weapon on a woman on the modern battlefield."

"Making gunshots and a corpse in this situation will not help us . We would be surrounded in no time at all."

"Hmph. So that's your excuse."

With a look of irritation, Charlotte turned the rifle barrel away from Quenser.

It seemed the fact that students and civilians were not targets of barrier duty had just barely managed to save Quenser's life.

"But in that case, you should have safely neutralized the worker yourself. We are still left in a dangerous situation. The security for this military mine is primarily carried out by UAVs, but we have no proof that they have no soldiers at all. A few dozen or even hundreds of civilian workers gathered against us in these tunnels is enough of a threat. Our Legitimacy Kingdom uniforms will be enough for them to show no mercy. I do not believe we can make broad statements like that we overlook civilians."

"…I understand. Sorry."

"In that case, get up and be quick about it. We need to get far away from here as quickly as we can. These tunnels may extend for over 100 kilometers like an ant nest, but we are still in an enclosed area. It would be best to assume we have no way of winning if they know where we are."

Quenser stood up while using a hand to steady himself against the plastic wall.

Charlotte then removed her luxurious revolver from its holster at her waist and tossed it to him.

"It seems you do not have a gun. That may be the policy of your unit, but this is an emergency. I will lend you this on my authority."

"Um…Thanks."

"It is not so you can fight. It is for suicide." Charlotte's words made the revolver suddenly feel much heavier. "It may be likely that the workers are civilians, but that means they may not have any smart weapons that can kill in a single shot. Having your body slowly smashed by construction tools rather than receiving a quick death is quite horrible. For that reason, you should be prepared."

"…"

"This is the risk you must take on now that you have let that worker escape. This is what decisions on the battlefield are like. Remember that."

Quenser nodded repeatedly, removed a bullet from the revolver to eliminate the risk of misfire, and stuck the gun in the gap between his boot and his foot.

The two quickly headed through the tunnel.

They wanted to move as fast as possible so as to get as far away as they could, but they had to be on the lookout for surprise attacks from other soldiers or workers.

Quenser looked up at the shiny ceiling covered in plastic.

"200 meters, hm? We might be below the sea that lies between those cliffs."

"Let us hope that their mining project was based on proper theory. If they did anything wrong, this area could become submerged."

"But…"

Quenser took a breath of surprisingly well-ventilated and non-humid air.

He wanted to distract himself from the possibility that they could be surrounded at any second.

"This is a joint operation between the 24th and the 37th. And the Faith Organization has the Wing Balancer here. Doesn't all that seem a bit much for an attack or defense of a coal mine?"

"Weren't you told that taking control of this military mine will allow us to lower the supply of Object fuel and therefore help limit the movements of the enemy?"

"But they have plenty of coal mines, right?"

"And damaging them one by one can lead to the lessening of a nation's overall power."

"But using 3 Objects if you take both sides into account? And if Nutley really was a Faith Organization spy, they used up a spy who had successfully infiltrated us. Once a spy reveals his true colors, he has to leave no matter how deeply he had infiltrated." Quenser frowned. "If just one of their many coal mines has this much value, wouldn't we normally target an easier mine instead? To be blunt, I do not think the resources here are worth deploying all the forces both sides have deployed."

As he made that comment, they exited into a different tunnel.

Simple rails were installed on the ground and some sort of electric panel was installed on the wall nearby. A small vehicle about the size of a bathtub sat stopped on the rails.

"This must be a type of electric slide lift. And it is meant for coal , not people."

"…"

"What is it?"

"It might not be coal."

With that comment, Quenser leaned over the edge of the slide lift and reached for a black rock left in the bottom. The mass looked like a large rock broken down to softball size.

Charlotte simply imagined coal as a black rock, so she did not understand what Quenser was getting at as he held it towards her.

Quenser gently stroked a spot on the rough mass and said, "Do you see these clear grains?"

"What is it?"

"A hunk of carbon," said Quenser at first before rewording his response. "A diamond."

Charlotte's shoulders jumped slightly.

However, Quenser was not able to explain further.

A hand shot out from the nearby opening of a narrow tunnel. It grabbed Quenser and slammed his back against the wall.

It took some time for Quenser to realize what had happened.

Charlotte immediately started to bring up her rifle, but she stopped partway through. The attacker pressed a handgun barrel

against Quenser such that it pushed his jaw up, but that was not why.

It was because she recognized the attacker.

"Hey, Quenser. What are you doing here?"

"Heivia…?"

"We went through a lot because you fucked up. Cookman and Westy are dead. I won't blow your brains out here, but I might have to open a few holes in your arms and legs depending on your answer here."

"It was Nutley."

It was Charlotte that responded, not Quenser.

In truth, Quenser had been unable to speak with Heivia's unusually ghastly face that close.

Charlotte's calm voice continued the explanation.

"There was a Faith Organization spy in your unit. We lost a student named Charles. He may bear some responsibility for not seeing through it beforehand, but it would be an error to blame him and him alone. Someone else is much more responsible."

"…Are you saying I should laugh and make up just because of that?"

"If you will not change your mind, I have no choice."

Charlotte held her assault rifle up once more.

This time, she did not hesitate.

"I have barrier duty. My job is to eliminate any elements that break military regulations and threaten the operation as a whole."

Heivia clicked his tongue.

With an annoyed look, he removed the handgun from Quenser's jaw and bowed his head towards Charlotte.

"Sorry. I forced the dirty job on you in order to give myself a chance to draw back."

"I do not think you actually intended to fire."

Charlotte removed her rifle's sight from his face and gave a very slight smile.

Upon seeing that, the Asian girl named Myonri finally poked her head out from behind the corner.

Quenser sighed heavily.

"…So only the four of us survived."

"There's five if you count the traitor." Heivia returned his handgun to its holster. "Things must be getting bad up above. They said the princess could not win in a straight fight against the Wing Balancer. Who knows how long she can last. We should

probably decide what we plan to do now. Let's have a strategy meeting, Quenser. Tell me everything you know."

"Um," cut in Myonri from the side. "What is that in your hand, Quenser?"

"This?" Quenser held the black softball-sized rock up and repeated the word he had said before. "A diamond."

Part 10

Froleytia gave a bitter expression within the maintenance base zone.

A deep rumbling shook below her feet every so often. She could see small bits of dust falling from the ceiling.

They could be in serious trouble.

That was her honest opinion. The Wing Balancer still had support from the large scale radar facilities, and it was using its free range of motion to corner the Baby Magnum. With cliffs running through the area like a net, the Wing Balancer had an overwhelming advantage with its ridiculous ability to jump over the gaps between cliffs. Meanwhile, the Baby Magnum's range of movement was limited, so the princess could not evade as she wanted.

(So we get nothing but silence from the Indigo Plasma and our other allies who were supposed to be keeping it out at sea. Dammit. The reinforcements we had to ensure we would not lose are acting as if we have already lost.)

If the Baby Magnum was pushed back, the Wing Balancer would then turn its sights on the maintenance base zone.

Should she raise the white flag and retreat before that happened ?

If the enemy was gentlemanly enough to respond to the white flag of an enemy that had started a surprise attack (an unlikely event, but she was trying to remain positive), the destruction of the Baby Magnum and the maintenance base zone could be avoided.

However, they would lose any chance to recover the soldiers sent out to carry out the surprise attack.

Since she could not contact them by radio, the odds of doing that were already near zero, but making that a definite zero was something else entirely.

"…This is quite a dilemma."

There was also an issue of very bad timing.

If the maintenance base zone was destroyed with the CS broadcast staff there, the deaths of the mass media workers could

light an unwelcome fire among the general public. It might not reach the Sovereign Parliament, but it could be enough to lead to the resignation of some councilors.

(But…)

Froleytia looked down at the radio on her desk.

(If the information we just received is true, retreating would leave a bad taste in my mouth. But that is also no reason to make the civilian CS broadcast staff bear the risk of staying along with us.)

Speaking of the CS broadcast staff that was causing such a dilemma…

"Dammit. What is going on…?" said a girl in a low moan.

The battlefield reporter named Monica was sitting by the wall with her arms wrapped around her knees and fidgeting. She was the type of performer for whom quite a lot relied on her face and general external appearance. The safe country TV station, her performance office, and some military officers had held a meeting. As a result, she alone was to be kept in the "safest place".

Froleytia had wanted to tell them the safest place was in the Object's cockpit, but her actual opinion was that even where she was, some dangers remained. For instance, if Monica happened to glance at the laptop Froleytia was using, it was possible she would end up being shot.

However, Monica herself seemed unaware of that danger. The reason was simple.

"No, no, no!! I've had it!! Railroad, military, internet, or something… That god damn manager said I would sell better if I had some special focus to distinguish me from others!! But I don't care about these smelly bases!! You've gotta be kidding me! If a shell lands here and my face is horribly burned, I won't just sell poorly! I'll have to say goodbye to the entire idol business!!"

That was why.

Basically, the entire "battlefield reporter" thing was just a publicity strategy and she had no experience with the military. The majority of her previous jobs had been in bases where complete control of the battlefield had been achieved and nothing but maintenance was being done. She would come in during the relatively safe periods between battles.

It was unclear if she herself had gotten sick of that or if the viewers had, but the next step had been to head to a maintenance base zone during the relatively dangerous time while an actual operation was underway.

"And! And! I went out of my way to choose a military focus despite not caring about it all, and that bastard isn't even here!! What is going on!? Why did I even come here if I just end up trembling in some freezing base!?"

Still sitting with her arms around her knees, Monica swayed back and forth while continuing her complaints that seemed directed at god for all Froleytia could tell.

"Dammit!! That maid!! I chose the military just so I could show him the return of the great Monica, so why is that bastard Quenser nowhere to be found!?"

"?"

Froleytia's eyebrows formed an expression of confusion.

Maid?

Quenser?

Part 11

Above ground, the Object called the Wing Balancer by the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Archangel by the Faith Organization was communicating with the unit defending the mining facility.

First, the control centre for the large radar facilities said, "We can defeat the Legitimacy Kingdom's Generation One Object now. It has taken the initiative and moved forward not because it has confidence in its ability but in order to buy time for the maintenance base to retreat. For safety reasons, we should take it out here rather than drawing it in further. The other Object that fled offshore could see a chance and approach at any time."

In response, the Archangel said, "Not yet. Simply defeating it would be easy enough. I'm not about to lose to a Generation One like that. However, simply destroying it will not achieve our goal. We should wait for a chance to invite it in."

The four exchanged the information they had.

They knew victims had come from each unit. They knew that they had lost both large radios.

And…

"Wait, wait, wait, wait. Do you mean this is a diamond mine rather than a military coal mine? Is that the type of deposits they were looking for with ultrasonic wave devices?"

"No, my guess is that this was originally a coal mine. A new survey just so happened to find an unexpected byproduct."

"So is that why the Legitimacy Kingdom military suddenly took an interest in the Kamchatka Peninsula and began this operation to take control of the mine? This is nothing but a war of interests."

"Diamond production used to be dependent on places like South America, Oceania, and Africa," said Charlotte. "The distribution of power in those areas of production is fairly well set in stone. Problems also often arise in areas that are estimated to

have deposits. If a brand new, stable source was discovered, it would be similar to creating a brand new market. Any world power would desperately want to get their hands on it."

"For us, the real surprise was that this isn't a military mine," said Quenser in shock.

He looked through the anti-war publication Myonri had handed him.

It gave details on what causes they supported with their earnings and told how many people were working in the mine. They were of course hiding that it was a diamond mine, so it was referred to as a coal mine.

According to the numbers given, there were 10,500 people working in the mine.

"And these workers are all part of some anti-war group in the Faith Organization. They were working for money they could donate to poor people in the Legitimacy Kingdom for a drinking water well. What the hell are we even fighting for?"

"The coordinates are listed as a military facility," added Charlotte. Her bitter expression likely came from recalling that she had aimed her rifle at an anti-war worker. "But it seems the workers here do not intend to fight. The reason we have not seen any workers may be that they all evacuated as soon as they heard the commotion from above. There should be refuge rooms scattered about meant for awaiting rescue in the event of a cave-in."

"So to sum it all up," said Heivia. "Our higher ups in the Legitimacy Kingdom military somehow learned that the eastern coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula is filled with diamonds, so they quickly sent an Object there to attack a mine filled with pacifists!? That puts the Wing Balancer squarely in the category of 'ally of justice' by protecting the diamond mine!!"

War was not like something from a children's comic. It was almost always driven by murky human interests.

They had known that.

But…

"That's just too much. That makes us the clear bad guys…" muttered Quenser, hanging his head.

However, Myonri then spoke up for the first time in the discussion.

"It might not be that."

"What might not be what, Myonri?"

"The reason behind this battle." As Myonri gathered her thoughts, she looked Heivia in the face and then Quenser and Charlotte in turn. "It might not be the diamonds."

"What?" Quenser asked.

Myonri gave a single small shake of her head and said, “The Faith Organization’s actions bother me. If they were really trying to protect the diamond mine, would they wait for the enemy Object right above the mine? They should have been able to predict that we would invade from Alaska and over the Bering Sea . So wouldn’t it make more sense to set up a defensive line on the sea?”

“Well…” Quenser trailed off but then began again. “You and Heivia said the Wing Balancer could jump. It’s perfectly matched for this partially manmade ria coast. It also has the large radar facilities here, don’t you think it probably just wanted as much of an advantage as it could get when fighting our princess?”

“There is an even better reason.”

“?”

Quenser, Heivia, and Charlotte looked puzzled.

Myonri went on to say, “Listen. This mine is run by pacifists who wish to talk things out with other forces rather than fighting them. That is a rare position within the Faith Organization. As they are carrying out just a few large scale charitable acts, they are probably all from some influential group rather than a gathering of disparate people with similar views. They are probably a thorn in the side of the higher ups of the military who want war to continue . Meaning…” She paused for a second. “Isn’t it possible they want to have them all slaughtered amidst the confusion of an Object vs. Object battle while they are all gathered in one place?”

Quenser could not help but gasp.

"Then the information about diamonds was nothing but bait to draw in the Legitimacy Kingdom military?"

"The Faith Organization is a group of ideologies," said Charlotte slowly. "It is possible that they would sometimes fear an ideology. Such as one saying not to fight. The higher ups of the Faith Organization undoubtedly want this global war to continue and to achieve victory for themselves in the end. A group spreading an ideology touting peaceful resolution would be in the way of the profit of victory that the higher ups wish for."

Myonri nodded.

"The Faith Organization military wishes to quickly deal with this anti-war group, but if they slaughtered or purged them themselves, it could lead to anti-war sentiment spreading further. But if the anti-war group is killed by an Object from the very world power they were reaching out to help…"

"The trust they had tried to give us would cause their hatred to grow even greater than normal," said Charlotte.

In her barrier duty, she had likely seen plenty of the negative emotions that could overcome people. Her voice was quiet, but it held a great weight.

Heivia frantically said, "Wait, wait, wait, wait! This is all speculation. We have no proof that Myonri's idea is correct."

"This is just adding speculation atop speculation." Quenser pointed straight up. "But I thought the princess had no chance of victory if she fought the Wing Balancer in a straight fight. So why haven't we heard a declaration of victory through the tunnel speakers yet? If they had defeated an Object, the symbol of the military, it should be like a victory parade was going on. That craft 's strength is absolute. There is no room for miracles to play into it. So if the princess hasn't lost yet, isn't that a sign that the Faith Organization military is acting oddly?"

"You mean the Wing Balancer isn't putting up a real fight?"

"It is drawing the Baby Magnum in closer to the true target," said Charlotte quickly. "It does not matter which Object attacks the mine. If either Object bombards it in the process of the battle, their objective will be achieved."

"But." Heivia seemed to be searching for anything to deny that was what was happening. "This mine continues for 150 kilometers along the coast and 90 kilometers inland. Can an Object really destroy the entire thing that easily?"

"The mine is between 1000 and 4000 meters deep. The freezing seawater is probably more of a concern than the earth. If several specific points are shelled, a deluge of seawater will likely drown or freeze anyone inside."

"Then if they alter the information slightly from it being 'in the confusion of battle' to 'because of the enemy's movements', the ignorant Faith Organization civilians will be incited to support the war."

"Things are going to get ugly at this rate," said Quenser, voicing his fears. "If we don't put an end to this before the princess is used, this will get bad. How many people work in this mine? Um…That publication said 10,500 I think. All of them will be slaughtered for the sake of the Faith Organization's national policy."

"If this was a normal mine, it would be much more mechanized and have fewer people. But a diamond mine is different. People are needed to sort out the small ores without damaging them," replied Charlotte immediately.

Heivia then said, "But what exactly are we supposed to do? We know the Faith Organization military is putting together some horrible plan, but how can we stop it? Please don't tell me you want us to deal with the Wing Balancer on our own."

"Are you saying you want to just stay here?" Quenser gave a slight sigh. "If the Faith Organization's ultimate target is this mine, this seems like the most dangerous place to me."

"Shit," cursed Heivia.

Myonri raised a small hand.

"So what do you suggest we do?"

"Your unit was headed to Point 1, right? You were going to use an interference program to mess with the large radar facilities' targeting correction for the Wing Balancer. Is your electronic equipment still functioning?"

"Yes. But you can't mean…"

"What we need to do hasn't changed." Quenser messed with the handheld device proffered by Myonri and copied the interference program to his own device. "The only difference is that they know about us now. But from the vibrations coming from above, the Winger Balancer must be focused on its battle with the princess. We can take that chance to head to Point 1 and use the program."

"That's easier said than done," groaned Heivia. "If that would cut it, our huge-breasted commander wouldn't have put together that complicated plan in the first place. She held the princess's appearance to the end because she had no other choice. The princess has now overturned those plans by coming out onto the stage. If we head forward now, we'll just find a dead end."

"Since that plan has been overturned, we can't hope for a perfectly safe plan. …I'd say this is better than charging at a 200,000 ton mass of steel, though."

"God dammit. Why can you never make the wise decision to just run away!?"

Quenser and the other three ended up heading down the tunnel . They were headed for Point 1, but the above ground route had countless UAVs flying around and two Objects clashing. They decided on the slightly safer path.

(I don't know where they're hiding, but it's fortunate no workers are nearby.)

That thought had nothing to do with humanitarianism or the like. He simply did not want to be crushed by a mass of panicked people in those cramped tunnels.

The interior walls were covered in smooth plastic, but black rock jutted out at various points. The tunnels were poorly made in those places and in some areas they were forced to cross an abyss on a bridge made of damp wood. They were led through the tunnels by Heivia and Myonri who had come from an area near Point 1.

Suddenly, Quenser heard a slight cracking noise.

A thin crack ran down the plastic wall to the side. The Objects were still fighting above their heads. He assumed the vibrations from that had shaken the entire tunnel, causing the crack in the wall.

But he was wrong.

With a sound of destruction that stabbed into his ears, the rock surface crumbled and a giant mass of machinery charged through.

The four of them leaped and rolled away from the mass of machinery either forwards or backwards in the tunnel. Through the dust, Quenser saw the mass of machinery slam into the plastic wall on the opposite side, making a creaking noise.

“A powered suit…!?”

It probably was not a military weapon. The parts for the arms and legs were excessively thick, but it had odd gaps in the armor. The machinery required to move its body was plainly visible. Its design prioritized ease of maintenance over defense.

"Shit, what the hell!? Is that a mining model!?'

Quenser heard Heivia shouting from beyond the powered suit. The path leading to their destination was also on the other side. In other words, Quenser's path was blocked by the powered suit.

Quenser felt a chill run down his spine.

This was not a worker from the mine.

If the workers were who Quenser and the others predicted they were, they would not do this.

(I know it's you, you coward.)

Quenser's eyes met with the inorganic camera lens.

(You goddamn spy. I can tell you're laughing your ass off beyond that steel!!)

The unrefined arm meant to tear through the bedrock and dig through solid rock aimed for Quenser's head. A sound like the grinding of heavy gears reverberated through the area.

He had no time to avoid it.

The thick fingers grabbed Quenser's entire tidy head.

Heivia immediately held up his assault rifle.

But Quenser of all people told him to stop.

"Gah…!? Geh…uuh…Stop, Heivia!!"

"Why!?"

"You can't shoot through that thick armor!! The ricocheting bullets will kill us, not him!!"

"But!!"

Heivia did not remove his eye from the sight.

But it was true that his rifle bullets could not penetrate the powered suit armor.

But if he did nothing, Quenser's head would be crushed in just a few more seconds.

Suddenly, a dull noise reverberated through the tunnel.

It came from the side.

A new figure appeared from the hole the powered suit had smashed open. She swung a pickaxe down at the gap in the joint between the powered suit's palm and wrist and the sharp point stabbed in.

Powered suits were used for many tasks and there were many different models, but mining models tended not to worry much about keeping the joints sealed. In fact, gaps helped vent heat.

The tip of the pickaxe that found its way into the gap in the armor dug into the internal machinery, forcibly stopping the movement of the wrist.

The powered suit's fingers stopped moving.

Quenser, who had been hanging a bit off the ground, fell back down.

"Gah…!?" he groaned, but then someone grabbed his hand off the ground.

It was not a Legitimacy Kingdom soldier.

It was the female worker from the Faith Organization anti-war group that had been carrying the first-aid kit before.

"Hurry!!" Her intonation was a bit off, but the worker spoke in English, a language people of the Legitimacy Kingdom would understand. "This won't last forever!! You need to get out of here now!!"

At the same time, Quenser heard a dull noise.

The powered suit forcibly moved its arm with the pickaxe still stabbed into the wrist joint. After the sound of something breaking , the destroyed pickaxe fell to the ground. That had not been enough to hold back the horsepower of the powered suit.

The powered suit clenched its giant fist and swung it.

It was aiming for Quenser…

(No, it isn't!!)

He immediately tackled the female worker.

In the next instant, the fist aimed for the woman flew through empty air and struck the plastic-covered floor of the tunnel.

The plastic shattered, cracks ran through the bedrock, a great vibration emanated out, and dust flew into the air.

"You!!" shouted Charlotte as she pulled Quenser up from the ground. She then dragged him back and away.

"What about the worker!?"

"We've got her over here!!" responded Heivia from the other side of the powered suit.

The worker seemed to try to say something, but the dust caused her to cough violently.

"Heivia, Myonri, you head on!! Don't try to fight back! Do you really think you can do anything with that rifle!?"

"To hell with that!! I have an anti-tank missile, y'know!?"

"Do you *want* to bury us all alive!? Just get going!! Hurry!!"

"Fine, you goddamn knight!! We'll release the worker when we find a good place. Don't you dare get yourself killed, okay!?"

For a bit, it felt like they were hesitating, but Quenser finally heard a few sets of receding footsteps. Heivia and Myonri were heading further on with the civilian worker. Quenser and Charlotte were staying behind.

With the unnerving sound of hydraulic machinery, the powered suit turned to fully face them.

It stood over 3 meters tall, so it almost completely filled the tunnel. Quenser doubted they could manage to slip by or under it.

Charlotte audibly gulped and then spoke to Quenser.

"Now then, what should we do?"

"Just to check, who do you think is in there?"

As she looked at the powered suit that had wordlessly crashed through the wall to attack them, Charlotte gave a blunt reply.

"Only that traitor could have attacked us with such perfect timing."

"Then I think we need to pay that bastard Nutley back for what he did."

Part 12

That said, Quenser and Charlotte were not about to charge straight at the mining powered suit. Even if it was not a military model, it was heavy construction equipment designed to efficiently break through chunks of rock and to protect its pilot from falling rocks and cave-ins. It was not something they could handle with rifle bullets.

The one piece of luck was its slow speed. That was likely to prevent as much unnecessary vibration as possible and therefore avoid the risk of unnecessary cave-ins. When Quenser and Charlotte ran away, they were not caught immediately. And as a mining model, their enemy did not have any projectiles.

"This will not last long," said Charlotte in a bitter tone. "The issue of stamina will rear its ugly head before long. The harsh slope of this tunnel will eat away our strength in no time. Then the powered suit will catch up. If we do not find a way to defeat it first , we will both be crushed into meatballs."

"I am not putting distance between us to run away." As he ran alongside her, Quenser pulled a Hand Axe plastic explosive out of the bag on his back. "It's to make sure we don't get hurt when I blow it away."

"Come to think of it, you said your designation was combat engineer. But the shockwave will spread further in this enclosed tunnel than outside."

"Yes, if you just used it normally. But if you use your head, that can be reduced."

As he spoke, Quenser stabbed a fuse into the Hand Axe and threw it at the corner between the wall and the floor. While still running, he threw a smaller amount of Hand Axe at the ceiling. The clay-like explosive stuck to the plastic on the ceiling.

"You don't mean…"

"Just to be sure, you should cover your ears," Quenser said as he spun around.

Just as the mining powered suit stepped on the Hand Axe on the ground, Quenser used his thumb to hit the switch on his radio and send a signal to the two fuses.

There was an explosion.

However, it did not come from the bomb at the mining powered suit's feet. It came from the smaller bomb on the ceiling.

The plastic wall crumbled and a shutter of dirt and rock closed between Quenser and the powered suit.

Then the other fuse activated.

Quenser had thought the wall of dirt and rock might affect the signal, so he had set the bigger bomb to detonate with a time lag.

With a large explosive noise, Quenser and Charlotte were knocked off their feet.

Despite being a good distance away and having a wall of dirt and rock in the way, the shockwave swept through the tunnel and

knocked them to the ground. Cracks ran through the plastic walls. A large amount of dust shot through the tunnel like something out of an ad for a bath pipe cleaner.

"…You… Just…a bit more…and it would…have been like…we were hit…by a shrapnel…grenade…"

Charlotte seemed to be trying to complain, but Quenser's sense of hearing had been temporarily thrown out of order, so he could not hear her properly.

He coughed and looked through the dust.

Suddenly, he felt a great movement of the air on his skin. The dust was split apart. Quenser could see something large approaching from beyond with awkward movements. It was the mining powered suit. Its legs were burned a bit black, but it seemed to be moving just fine. It was tougher than he had expected.

Charlotte grabbed his arm.

Quenser was forced away by someone tugging on his arm.

"That level of explosion wasn't enough!!"

His hearing had finally recovered. And the first voice he heard was filled with despair.

"But if I had used any more explosive than that, we could easily have been buried alive!!"

"We need to think of a different way to set it," said Charlotte as she wiped dirt from her face with an arm. "Regulate the destruction by pointing the blast to focus in one direction. If the shockwave heads primarily away from us, the risk of being buried alive will drop as well. We just need some thick piece of steel or…"

She trailed off.

The mining powered suit approaching from behind did something new.

It used its metal glove-like arm to destroy the wall to the side. It then grabbed a mass of rock about the size of a soccer ball.

(Not good…!)

Quenser did not even have time to cry out.

The powered suit used its strength to its fullest and threw the mass of rock.

As it flew at them with the force of a shell, Charlotte pushed Quenser to the side. The rock slightly grazed Charlotte's outstretched arm. Her slender body spun unnaturally and was slammed to the ground.

"Charlotte!!"

"Tch. I thought it just tugged at my clothing, but it managed to break my arm." When Charlotte tried to stand up, she grimaced. " And my leg is hurt, too. It is only sprained, but I still cannot continue on."

"Shit!!" shouted Quenser before grabbed Charlotte's unbroken arm.

He wrapped it around his shoulders and forced her to stand up. He also took the assault rifle hanging from her shoulder.

"You, stop this. This will only get you killed, too."

"Be quiet."

The assault rifle had something like a grenade launcher attached to the bottom. However, when he checked closer, it was not a tool for firing explosives; it was a shotgun-like device made up of many different laser emitters.

While they were lasers, they of course could not tear through metal like the ones used by Objects.

It was a device intended to throw off the targeting device of an enemy's guided weapon.

(…An IR jammer… It's not much more than a toy laser pointer. How am I supposed to oppose a powered suit with this!?)

"I am not part of your unit, you are a battlefield student, and the situation is hopeless enough to allow emergency decisions. You will not be punishable under martial law if you abandon me here."

"You say that, but we're trying to save enemy civilians here."

"You, listen."

"No, you listen," said Quenser, cutting her off. The mining power suit was slowly but surely approaching. "The first Object was created in a far east island nation. As someone who wants to become a designer, I have a certain amount of admiration for them . But there is one phrase they have there that I don't like. Do you know what that is?"

"I do not know much about Eastern culture."

"The beautiful die young."

When Quenser said that in a single breath, Charlotte glanced over at his face.

Finally, she sighed and said, "Enough flattery."

"If it was just flattery, I wouldn't be risking my life."

Quenser continued forward while supporting Charlotte's weight.

But they would eventually be overtaken at that rate.

Quenser looked around and spotted a different path splitting off from the side of the tunnel. He peered in, and found a large area. The space looked large enough for a regulation basketball court and it was about three stories high.

"This must be the area for the work other than the mining itself. You can see a terminal for a number of slide lifts over there."

Despite how large the area was, the inside was quite complicated. A lot of equipment had been brought in. There were conveyer belts that bent back on themselves again and again, creating a bellows shape, and large devices that looked like the concept of "outdated" in mechanical form. A number of large tanks for throwing away unneeded rock were lined up, and a long, narrow work table was set up for the final detailed sorting.

However, no workers were present.

The devices and table had split black rocks left on them.

Had they been on break? Or had they frantically fled once they heard the sounds of explosions and destruction? It was impossible to tell. However, sounds of activity could be heard from a few of the machines, and some of the devices were warm to the touch.

As she looked over the complexly laid out machinery, Charlotte said, "We might be able to hide in here."

"If he just destroys everything in here, he'll find us."

"If we leave while he is searching and use a bomb to seal the exit…"

"That mining model will be able to dig through the rock blocking the exit."

"Then what do you suggest we do? Are you going to use the larger space to use more explosives? Or are you going to use a slide lift to escape?"

"Well…"

Before he could continue, a large noise came from the entrance.

The mining powered suit had entered.

They had no time.

Because the work area was large and was filled with lots of large pieces of machinery, they would not be found right away. However, just holding their breath and hiding would not allow them to survive. The longer they hesitated, the closer to being truly cornered they would be.

Quenser whispered to Charlotte.

"(I'll deal with him somehow. You hide over there.)"

"(…You!!)"

She called out to stop him, but Quenser ignored her and ducked underneath one of the conveyer belts. The conveyer belt was supported by pillars about as thick as his index finger, and he could move along beneath it by crouching.

Quenser pulled out some Hand Axe and approached the long narrow table for the manual work. A number of tools were scattered atop the table, but he clicked his tongue upon seeing them.

(No good. Just what's here won't cut it. But if this mine is what we think it is, there has to be some somewhere.)

Quenser looked around, but then suddenly stopped.

He had spotted a steel safe by the wall.

It was about the size of a bookshelf, and the door used an old fashioned dial lock.

"Is that it?" Quenser muttered before heading for the safe.

A toolbox had been carelessly left near the safe. It was likely used to maintain the large pieces of machinery and to create additional shelves or tables out of wood.

He opened the toolbox and pulled out an L-shaped crowbar.

He stuck the metal end into the gap next to the door and forced it open using leverage.

The sound of the metal breaking was louder than he had expected.

Quenser found what he was looking for in the safe and pressed them into the Hand Axe he had flattened in his palm. He grabbed the deformed explosive once more and forced off a maintenance panel on a nearby piece of equipment. The steel panel was half as thick as a notebook. He gave it a large dent by stomping on it, attached the explosive in the dent, and stabbed an electric fuse in.

At that same time, a group of machinery built up like a mountain of children's building blocks collapsed all at once like a pillar beneath them had been removed. The mining powered suit had plowed through beneath them. It crushed the masses of steel, tore through them, and headed straight toward Quenser.

"Kh…!!"

He had been found.

But given the noise he had made, that was not too surprising.

Quenser placed the explosive at his feet, flipped over a nearby table, and placed it over the explosive. He finished just as the powered suit attacked.

He just barely managed to evade.

Or so he thought. In the next instant, a great shock ran through him.

He had managed to avoid the giant steel powered suit itself, but the remnants of a device it smashed through flew about and a few fragments struck Quenser. He tried to just clench his teeth, but he could not hold back a cry of pain. He could not immediately get back up. He used his arms to drag himself along the ground.

The mining powered suit turned toward him.

Its thick arm slowly stretched out.

It had to know that Quenser had set something up. However, it seemed have determined it was not even worth worrying about. That may have been partially due to the thick armor withstanding one of Quenser's bombs already.

It was true that Quenser could not defeat the powered suit with just the blast.

But…

"As an intelligence operative, you must have known what that powered suit was being used to mine, right?" Quenser smiled and operated his radio. "Diamonds. The world's hardest mineral."

An explosion erupted nearby.

The intentionally bent steel plate directed the blast, and several diamonds embedded in the surface of the Hand Axe plastic explosive scattered like a shotgun blast.

They opened holes in the thick metal of the devices in their path , A few cracks appeared in the smooth plastic wall, and needless to say, the mining powered suit right in front of the blast was hit by a storm of diamonds.

Diamonds were so hard they would shatter, so they were normally ill suited as bullets or shells.

However, while a military model may have been a different story, they had enough destructive power to penetrate the armor of a mining model.

The countless gems found their way in through gaps in the steel plates and became a storm of deadly bullets.

With a great noise and a burst of sparks, the giant mining powered suit seemed to float slightly. The armor split apart. The black oil used for the hydraulic equipment spilled to the ground. That oil was mixed with a liquid of a different color. This other liquid was red and smelled of rusted metal.

The powered suit ceased all movement.

Quenser slowly stood up and took a good look at the powered suit that had been destroyed by a scatter shot at close range.

"…Wow. It's so shiny. It's full of diamonds," he said as if spitting out the words. "You should be glad. You got the world's most lavish funerary makeup."

Part 13

Quenser and Charlotte decided to head above ground.

As Heivia and Myonri had gone on ahead, Quenser and Charlotte did not know what path led to Point 1.

"It seems Heivia and the others made it away."

"By now, they have likely released that worker you were worried about."

"…Are you still mad about that?"

"No, you were right this time. But only in hindsight. To be honest, I am glad I did not kill her."

Quenser was still supporting Charlotte. He was also still carrying her assault rifle.

"It would be better to head up rather than waste time in these labyrinthine tunnels."

"Will we head to Point 1 aboveground?"

"I would like to contact the maintenance base zone first. They still do not know what is going on. I do not know what we can do, but it would be best to at least get that information across. We cannot transmit long distance with our radios, but we can contact them if we approach the base."

They headed up a sloping path that turned back on itself again and again until they arrived at an exit to the underground mine.

They stuck their heads out to check on the situation outside.

In the darkness of night, they could see a scene that looked like the end of the world.

Two monstrous weapons over 50 meters tall were firing at each other. The blasts that seemed like physical masses spread across the ground and caused the occasional cliff to crumble like a cookie. High-pitched noises slammed into their eardrums and shockwaves hit their guts like body blows. Coilgun shells drew orange

trajectories through the sky, and bluish-white beams flew from low-stability plasma cannons. The Arctic darkness was forcibly ripped apart by manmade weapons.

"I don't see the UAVs."

"With all this going on, they would lose control and crash, so they must have called them in. They do cost 50,000 euros each after all."

Did that at least slightly increase the odds of Heivia and Myonri reaching Point 1 and inserting the interference program?

(But that's only if Heivia doesn't decide it isn't worth it and run away.)

With Quenser and Charlotte still showing no sign of meeting up with them, those two probably thought they had run away. But there was no time to eliminate every misunderstanding.

Quenser went over the situation in his head once more.

The Legitimacy Kingdom had the disadvantage militarily.

The Wing Balancer was a distinctive Object. It had around 20 legs connecting the double concentric circle-shaped propulsion device and the spherical main body. It had a giant coilgun on the center of the front of its main body. And it had "weight wings" to help it keep its balance with its center of gravity and the inertia

when it made rapid turns. The video data from the previous naval battle did not show it, but it was now repeatedly jumping over the gaps between cliffs.

"Amazing. Heivia wasn't kidding. That giant thing really is jumping…"

"They were either hiding it in past battles or it never felt the need to jump on the relatively flat sea. Either way, this is a dangerous enemy."

Charlotte was not wrong.

The main advantage the Wing Balancer had was its range of movement. The Kamchatka Peninsula was split up by a multitude of cliffs like cracked glass. It was a difficult terrain for the Baby Magnum. The Baby Magnum's range of movement was limited and this made it much more difficult to take evasive actions. Meanwhile, the Wing Balancer could jump over the gaps between cliffs. By freely jumping around, it could maintain an advantageous distance, evade easily, and otherwise trouble the princess.

The one piece of fortune was that all the focus on the Wing Balancer's maneuverability had left something lacking in the destructive power of its weapons. The princess's Object had dents in various places and a few of its 7 main cannons were twisted, but she had no damage on a level beyond that. She had already been struck by the enemy's main cannon a few times. Normally, that would have been enough to shoot straight through the reactor.

Quenser lowered Charlotte to the ground near the mine's exit.

"Charlotte, use your radio to contact the base and inform Froleytia of the situation."

"We are still too far away. Our radios will not reach the maintenance base zone."

"Contact the base via the Object. The Baby Magnum's antennae can reach the base."

"I see." Charlotte Zoom pulled out a small device. "But the Faith Organization's interception antennae might pick up on the signal."

"We just have to trust in our encryption."

Charlotte used the small communications device and began to explain the Faith Organization's intention to the maintenance base. The princess must have realized her equipment was being used because she contacted Quenser.

"…Quenser, are you still alive?"

"When I introduce myself to people, I'm beginning to think I should start saying my special skill is stubbornly surviving," replied Quenser as if spitting out the words. "What's the situation?"

"Exhausting. The base zone is beginning the process of retreating, but just getting out to sea does not mean they have escaped. The Wing Balancer can head out onto the water without switching out parts."

"So it can jump and it can go out over the sea… I guess this really is the age of air cushions. It is a pain how you have to exchange parts every time."

"But its speed is not all that great," added the princess quickly, sounding a bit miffed. "If this battle was in a normal environment, my Object would definitely have won."

"Come to think of it, the Information Alliance's Rush had treads for high speed movement on top of its primary air cushion."

"…Why are you bringing up that horrible girl?"

The princess's tone dropped even further.

She seemed to truly detest that "Oh ho ho".

It was unbelievable that she was continuing to make small movements to evade the Wing Balancer's weapons' fire.

"I'd love to help out, but I don't have enough information," said Quenser. "Have you figured out any characteristics of the Object while fighting it? Like what areas its movements suggest it is more carefully protecting or something like that."

"It seems everything related to chassis is rather delicate. When I try to aim my main cannon at its lower portion, it makes a large jump over to the other side of the cliffs."

"Well, from the power of its cannons, it would be pretty much done for if its maneuverability was lost."

"Also, it put up a violent counterattack when I took out one of the wings on its back. I think it was panicking."

Quenser looked again and noticed that the Wing Balancer had only 3 wings attached to its back. It was an odd balance. It would have looked more even with four of them.

(I suppose it would be best to start by thinking of a way to target the Wing Balancer's legs. It has a device that keeps it afloat using massive amounts of compressed air and wings to keep its balance even in midair. Is there any way to counterattack using that?)

Suddenly, the Wing Balancer made a clear change in its movements. Previously, it had been using all of its countless weapons, including its main cannon, to fire at the Baby Magnum, but its aim now changed.

Yes.

It was targeting Quenser now.

"It noticed me!?"

Its cameras and sensors may have determined his location. Or perhaps it had tracked down the source of the radio signal. In either case, there was nothing he could do when targeted by an Object. Even if he tried to run away, the shockwave and aftereffects of the cannon firing would be enough to blow away his flesh-and-blood body.

The Wing Balancer showed no mercy.

As soon as it lined up its sights, it fired.

"Quenser!!"

The Baby Magnum quickly interposed itself between them. Several loud metallic noises rang out. A 50+ meter Object had acted as a shield for a flesh-and-blood soldier.

In that same moment, the Wing Balancer's aim suddenly veered off.

Quenser had not done anything. The Baby Magnum had stopped in order to act as a shield. There was no reason for the enemy's aim to be off in that situation.

Except one.

(Did Heivia and Myonri input the interference program at Point 1!?)

But the Wing Balancer did not stop.

Quenser heard the sound of compressed air being emitted.

In the next instant, he saw a shadow over the aurora in the night sky. It was the giant form of the Object. Using the same technique it did to jump from cliff to cliff, the Wing Balancer was trying to jump clear over the Baby Magnum.

The lower portion of the Wing Balancer had nothing but the mechanisms related to the chassis and no weapons at all. However , those mechanisms could create a blast of air strong enough to support such a giant machine. A violent wind would blow across the entire area when it landed. If that happened, Quenser's puny body would be blown dozens of meters away even if he tried to take cover.

"!!"

The princess immediately aimed her weapons straight up. Around 100 weapons both large and small roared. Unfortunately, the few main cannons that were specially made to attack upwards were malfunctioning. The non-main cannons held enough destructive power to make a tank look like nothing, but they could not do any real damage to another monstrous Object.

As Quenser looked up, he saw the two concentric circles of the propulsion device split apart into around 20 pieces. The many fan-shaped pieces looked like canned pineapple slices. To Quenser, they looked like spears preparing to stab down at him. The part he was seeing was analogous to the bottom of a human's foot. Quenser spotted many large lenses there.

That became the small beginning of an idea.

Quenser instinctually grabbed the assault rifle hanging from his shoulder on a sling belt and aimed it straight up.

But…

(I don't have enough time!!)

The Wing Balancer fell down nearby.

Immediately before it did, the Baby Magnum fired its smallest coilgun. It was not firing at the Wing Balancer. It was firing at a large stone a bit away from Quenser.

The broken stone was moved to a position where it shielded Quenser.

Just as Quenser was knocked off his feet by the shockwave, the Wing Balancer landed. A violent wind spread out in every direction from where it landed.

Despite being protected by a large stone and lying down in the snow, Quenser's body was lifted a few meters up into the air. But that was better than the alternative. Without the cover he had, he would have been blasted dozens of meters away.

The Wing Balancer's main cannon roared twice.

The princess immediately took evasive actions, but the very right edge of the spherical body was torn away.

Just as the seven main cannon arms moved into place for a counterattack, the Wing Balancer's split legs portion began creaking once more.

It jumped.

It leaped over the Baby Magnum to maintain its position in the blind spot of the other Object's main cannons.

That position was dangerous.

Quenser immediately realized that fact.

The previous two main cannon shots had been nothing more than preparations driving the Baby Magnum into checkmate.

The first shot after it landed would be a direct hit on the princess.

As Quenser rolled across the ground, he opened the cover to the rifle's targeting assistance device. Currently, he did not have enough output.

Yes.

He was not planning to use the destructive power of the rifle bullets.

Those would never have any effect on an Object.

(An air cushion that uses compressed air as a cushion should work best with a large bottom surface area. So why does the Wing

Balancer split apart its chassis and negate the advantage of that large bottom surface area?)

The Wing Balancer passed by over Quenser's head.

He saw the glittering of the many lenses installed in addition to the compressed air ejection points.

(It must be to match the ups and downs of the terrain. With an air cushion, it is important to ensure the bottom surface of the craft and the ground are parallel while emitting the compressed air. That's why air cushions are more often used over water rather than the land. A piece of the terrain bulging up could cause problems. The Wing Balancer solves that problem by having the chassis split into around 20 pieces. The ups and downs of the terrain are calculated and those pieces are arranged to match it. And the means to calculate that would be…)

Quenser used the tip of the cooking knife from his survival kit to turn a small screw in the targeting assistance device. It functioned as a dial to set the output of the laser.

He then aimed the assault rifle straight up without bothering to close the cover.

(…Those lenses!! It uses infrared!!)

He moved his finger.

The targeting assistance infrared laser was emitted straight up.

It hit the lenses on the Wing Balancer's legs meant to calculate the makeup of the terrain.

By using the same type of infrared rays used to do the calculations, he would cause malfunctions.

"Give up, you piece of shit!! Come crashing down right here!!" shouted Quenser.

But that was not enough.

The bottom of the Wing Balancer was covered with hundreds or even thousands of infrared sensors, while Quenser just had a puny targeting device on the end of the rifle in his hands. He could not completely throw off the enemy's sensors with that.

(Is this still not enough!? Shit! Is there nothing else!?)

But…

Quenser's assault rifle had a special additional device attached.

An IR jammer.

That special device emitted a number of laser pointer-like infrared lasers like a shotgun in order to mess with the targeting of guided weapons.

He pulled the trigger.

It was invisible to the human eye, but the density of beams increased all at once.

The numerous lenses on the Wing Balancer trembled as if convulsing. They could no longer detect the ground.

The Wing Balancer had lost its basis for landing.

But the 200,000 ton mass continued to fall.

"Get out of the way!!" needlessly shouted the princess.

Quenser had already started moving to the side as quickly as he could.

Immediately afterwards, a great crater was created on the Kamchatka Peninsula.

A shockwave roared.

Quenser's body was thrown farther than he had expected. He rolled across the hard ground, receiving cuts and scrapes all over his body. But it was nowhere near as bad as when the air cushion had been functioning. The malfunction had been successful.

"Shit…What happened to that damn thing…?"

Quenser forced his aching body to get up.

The Wing Balancer had been unable to stop its fall, so over half of its around 20 legs had directly struck the ground and been

destroyed. The remaining legs had been unable to support its giant weight. The Wing Balancer sank down and stopped moving.

It must have not yet given up the fight because it tried to move its main cannon. However, the Wing Balancer could not turn itself around, so the Baby Magnum was easily able to move out of range by circling around. The Baby Magnum could fire its main cannon at any time. It was checkmate.

Quenser sent a short transmission to the princess.

"Ask them to surrender."

"First, I will fire from the side and destroy the Wing Balancer's main cannon."

With a great roar, the Faith Organization's last hope of resistance was suppressed. The shockwave sent Quenser rolling once more.

Quenser spat out the snow that had entered his mouth and looked over at Charlotte where he had left her at the entrance to the mine. She was waving at him with her back still leaning against the rock face. She seemed to be uninjured.

With that, the battle surrounding the Kamchatka Peninsula was over.

The Faith Organization's planned slaughter of the anti-war group and national policy of heightened war against the Legitimacy Kingdom had failed.

As Quenser reflected on that fact, he received a transmission from Froleytia.

"Point 1, Point 2, are you still alive!? We couldn't reach your radios, so we assumed you had been wiped out! How many of you were fortunate enough to survive!? At any rate, get out of there now!!"

"Froleytia?"

Quenser sent a transmission to the maintenance base zone via the large scale antennae equipped on the princess's Object.

He received a response almost immediately.

"We know what those behind this were after. They wanted to use the confusion of the battle to slaughter the Faith Organization civilians working in the mine on the eastern coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula!! That way they could continue the war between the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Faith Organization and gain more power!! They wanted the credit for victory, but if the war ended according to the plan, the victory would not be theirs. That was why they created circumstances where they could cause the war to continue!! They used the mine to that end. Anyone who can move needs to get as far away from the mine as possible!! You will get caught in the bombardment if you do not!!"

"You don't need to worry about that," said Quenser, relaxing.

Something seemed to have led to a delay in the information arriving at the base, so Froleytia's fears were needless.

"The Faith Organization Object can no longer move. The Wing Balancer has lost all ability to harm the civilians in the mine."

"…Yes. The Wing Balancer has."

There was an ominous tone to her voice.

Quenser felt the same kind of unease as when a time bomb's counter continued to countdown despite the cord having been cut.

Froleytia continued, "But the Wing Balancer is not the only one that wants to exacerbate this war."

"You don't mean…"

How many Objects were deployed to the Kamchatka Peninsula?

1. The Legitimacy Kingdom's Baby Magnum.

2. The Faith Organization's Wing Balancer.

And…

3. The Legitimacy Kingdom's Indigo Plasma that had withdrawn out to sea.

A few facts suddenly hit Quenser.

Nutley had not been a Faith Organization spy.

The Faith Organization military was not the only group that wished for the war to grow larger and fiercer.

In other words…

Nutley had been a spy sent by the 24th Mobile Maintenance Battalion of the Legitimacy Kingdom.

Quenser heard a low rumbling. At some point the Object that had supposedly fled beyond the horizon had approached the Kamchatka Peninsula once more. Its main cannon slowly moved as it aimed.

It was not aiming at the Wing Balancer. The Faith Organization Object was no longer functioning. It was not aiming at the Baby Magnum. It had no reason to fire on another Legitimacy Kingdom Object.

The Indigo Plasma's main cannon was creaking in the direction of empty terrain.

No.

The terrain may have appeared empty at first glance, but the Object was aiming at the diamond mine located underground.

"Stop…"

The anti-war group's publication and the face of the worker with the first aid kit entered the back of Quenser's mind.

The statistic of 10,500 people came back to him.

The princess's Baby Magnum moved before his eyes. However, it was not moving to attack the Indigo Plasma. It was too far away and there was the issue of military regulations. She could not decide whether she was allowed to fire on the Object or not.

Instead, the princess was moving to protect Quenser and Charlotte as she had before. She had foreseen the destruction and tragedy that was about to occur.

"

Stoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooppppppppppppppppp!!!!!"

The puny battlefield student's voice echoed through the battlefield.

Immediately afterwards, the Indigo Plasma opened fire.

The bluish-white beams of light of a low-stability plasma cannon tore through the dark night of the Kamchatka Peninsula. Explosion after explosion erupted. This was more than just a couple of shots. The areas hit had been carefully calculated to ensure that the holes would allow freezing seawater to fill the entire mine. The overwhelming destruction became a maelstrom that swept through the mine. The underground area caved-in and the terrain itself changed. A portion of the bedrock melted into lava which mixed with the seawater and created cumulonimbus cloud-like masses of steam. The mine became more than just a hell of being buried alive. A deluge of seawater poured in to completely finish off the people trapped inside.

Quenser did not have the leeway to just watch that utter massacre. Even with the Baby Magnum acting as a shield, the shockwave came around the Object and assaulted his ears. In an instant, his body lost all strength and he collapsed to the ground. His fingertips trembled. He forced them to stop and tried to stand up.

The bombardment continued for more than 10 minutes.

An Object held enough destructive power to roast the insides of an aircraft carrier in an instant, but this one continued firing on civilians for 10 minutes.

"…"

After that nightmarish bombardment came silence. Quenser was at a complete loss for words. He did not even wipe the dirt and soot from his face. In the scene before his eyes, absolutely everything had been destroyed. Red flames, black smoke, orange molten rock, and white steam. It had all the colors of a painting of hell. The one thing that would have made it worse was if the color of human flesh or the red of fresh blood had been visible from that distance. Either way, everyone in the mine had surely been killed.

The Indigo Plasma turned around.

The slaughterer calmly moved out to sea as if it was the true victor.

Quenser did not have the willpower to even think about pursuing it.

His conditions for victory would not be achieved by simply destroying it.

"Point 1, Point 2, any survivors report in," said Froleytia over the radio. Quenser honestly wanted to reply that he was dead, but then his silver-haired commander said something else. "Do not worry. The 10,500 members of the Faith Organization anti-war group are unharmed. Fortunately, that coal mine was secretly a diamond mine. They had an escape route prepared."

"…?"

"I explained that the eastern coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula has been turned into a terrain similar to a complex ria coast by an earthquake in the Bering Sea and their fourth submarine base construction plan, right? Well, there really was a submarine base there. Normally, costs prevent submarines from being used for transport. However, the Kamchatka Peninsula was producing ores valuable enough to make up for those costs."

"They were using submarines to transport the diamonds…?"

"And it wasn't just 1 or 2 hundred of them. Well, they wanted to prevent such expensive military funds from being stolen in transit. They needed enough to cover the actual group and a diversion. To use them here, they must have really wanted to hide the existence of the diamond mine. Those working in the mine managed to use them for themselves. This plan was calculated to efficiently destroy the mine. But that means you can get by if you

find an oversight in the plan. The Indigo Plasma used seawater, so I was a bit worried the submarines would be swept into some hole. ”

“But,” said Quenser in denial. He still did not believe it. “But how?”

“Those in the mine contacted us via radio. It seems someone from the anti-war group recovered the equipment from one of our dead. Using the frequency data in that equipment, they used the mine’s large-scale antenna to contact us. We are the Legitimacy Kingdom and they are the Faith Organization. I honestly had no proof they were telling the truth, but they actually listened to what I had to say. Also, they explained everything they knew about the equipment in the mine. That was why we were able to tell them how to take shelter. But it was still quite close. After all, there were over 10,000 of them. They began moving 2 hours ago, but they still just barely finished taking refuge. They are currently asking about the process required to defect to the Legitimacy Kingdom.”

It was around that point that it all started to feel real to Quenser .

(I see. The worker we first ran across in the tunnel had a first aid kit because of those communications.)

“As I said before, we thought Point 1 and Point 2 had been wiped out because we could not contact you via radio. That is why your view of the situation is inconsistent with ours. Honestly, I almost panicked when you suddenly appeared right in the middle of the battlefield.”

The Indigo Plasma's plan had not come to fruition.

The people in the mine had not been meaninglessly slaughtered .

"We were just contacted by Heivia and Myonri. It seems they are sheltering a single civilian worker and are unharmed."

There had been no civilian sacrifices.

Not even one.

"We were victorious here because we all trusted the words of strangers," said Froleytia in conclusion.

Part 14

Quenser helped support the Black Uniform named Charlotte. She had a broken arm and a sprained ankle. Quenser had a few choice words for whoever it was that had said Objects fought clean wars.

"Did you hear?" asked Heivia as he walked up. "The Indigo Plasma's 24th Mobile Maintenance Battalion has made an official declaration. The Councilors and the Sovereign Parliament are still arguing, but it's more or less decided. Our next enemies are fellow Legitimacy Kingdomers."

"…I don't like that. It reminds me of Councilor Flide."

"Oh, oh. That damn old man who used an Elite little girl as his pawn? I remember him."

As Quenser and Heivia casually gave out insults, Myonri cut in from the side.

"D-don't be so calm about this. Don't you understand? This is a civil war."

The shadow over Myonri's face may have been because she was recalling Cookman and Westy, her two lost comrades.

Charlotte remained silent.

She did not say a single word.

As a Black Uniform in charge of barrier duty wherein she investigated the military and gave out punishment where needed, she may have been ashamed of the current situation.

As Quenser continued to help her along, he said, "What are we even fighting for?"

"It isn't for peace or justice, that's for sure," spat out Heivia. "I'm fighting to inherit my noble family and you're fighting to become an Object designer. That hasn't changed. We know the 24th is our enemy, so let's use them as a stepping stone to our goals."

A distant middle-aged lieutenant shouted over at Heivia in a deep voice. He was being called over to help with some kind of work.

"Damn. Snow shoveling again? Now I wish I had lent my shoulder to the beauty."

"It's first come first serve."

"I know that, dammit. Hey, let's go, Myonri. I can at least have a cute young lady working with me."

"Eh? Eh?"

Myonri blinked as Heivia half-dragged her over toward the middle-aged lieutenant. Quenser focused on getting Charlotte to the large rescue helicopter.

Charlotte had remained silent up to that point, but now she sighed with her arm wrapped around Quenser's neck.

"…Honestly. This is not my job. I am a Black Uniform in charge of barrier duty."

"True, but I'm a battlefield student."

"You are the one that destroyed the Wing Balancer."

"You give me too much credit. Without the Baby Magnum, I would have been blown away when the Wing Balancer landed. And against a foot soldier like me, the Wing Balancer's many

cannons would have been enough even after the legs were taken out."

"Still," said Charlotte after a pause. "You contributed to the unit 's victory in that emergency situation. You might be awarded for this. I would think you will be given the Special Individual Medal for Victory."

"Eh? I thought that was only for official members of the military ?"

"That one can be given to civilians as well. You received a public commendation after the destruction of the Water Strider, remember? It is the same as that."

"…Really?"

"Really." Charlotte's lips relaxed slightly. "To be honest, I was a fan of yours. So I would not lie about this."

"?"

"At a bar I frequent, the bartender creates a new celebratory cocktail for every Object you and your partner destroy. Due to that , I cannot help but be interested in your actions."

"I'm not sure you could call that being a 'fan'…" said Quenser in shock.

But then he heard the sound of something small falling to the ground. It seemed something had fallen from a pocket of his uniform and onto the snow. Quenser looked down at his feet and froze in place.

It was a rubber box about the size of a cigarette carton.

The latch on the cover came off and some of the contents spilled out.

They were clear grains.

They were the ores commonly referred to as diamonds.

"…You."

The voice of Charlotte Zoom, a Black Uniform in charge of barrier duty, grew ultra icy.

Quenser's immediate thought was: Laughing is my only option.

"Ha…ha ha. Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha! Ah ha ha ha ha ha! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Did you know that there is a means of immobilizing the neck with just this arm I have around your shoulders?"

"I give! I give! I bgh-!! St-stop! Squeezing like that only presses your tits into my face!! And I happen to like the armpits of beautiful women, so keep this up if you want my inner self to awaken!!"

"Tch."

Charlotte had grabbed the collar of his uniform and begun to constrict his carotid artery, but she loosened her grip just before Quenser lost consciousness.

"This injury gives me a serious disadvantage."

"A-are you overlooking this…?"

"I have no choice," said Charlotte in annoyance. Her shoulders relaxed even further and she placed even more weight on Quenser. "I only have jurisdiction over official soldiers and other combat elements cooperating on the battlefield. I have no authority over a civilian student."

Chapter 3: Honor is Priceless >> Emergency Interception at Victoria Island

Part 1

Froleytia stood within a cargo plane.

There were a few dozen of them in all and they were all filled with various vehicles and equipment. The one Froleytia was on had nothing but high quality furnishings that were privately owned by a certain officer. In fact, the entire plane had been added specifically for her things.

Froleytia felt there was no need to split it apart like that, but the air force group that had supplied the cargo planes seemed to enjoy providing that kind of hospitality. As flashy dogfights had fallen out of fashion, they had learned the etiquette of making deliveries.

"The Legitimacy Kingdom military's 24th Mobile Maintenance Battalion and the Second Generation Indigo Plasma it controls seem to be trying to return to Europe by passing through Alaska and heading over the Atlantic Ocean. Currently, they are headed east while breaking through the thick ice in the ocean around the Queen Elizabeth Islands in the Arctic. They should soon realize that is inefficient and head up onto land. The nearby Victoria Island seems the most likely landing point."

As Froleytia listened to the female operator from the electronic simulation department, she quietly exhaled some tobacco smoke.

"…I can't believe it is taking us so long to attack. If we had just blockaded the Bering Sea, we could have cut off the Indigo Plasma and the 24th. Then they would surely have run out of material. Due to our slow response, they were able to meet up with the unit hidden in Alaska and resupply. They might very well be throwing a victory party right this very instant. …I wonder if the higher ups in the Sovereign Parliament are secretly negotiating with both sides."

"This is a rare occurrence even in historical terms. The 24th may have taken that into account when they made their plan."

"Fortunately, we had the CS broadcast team here for the interviews. That gives us video evidence for the entire thing from beginning to end. I doubt the production staff for a variety program thought the footage they were taking would ever reach scowling top-level military officers, nobles, or royals."

"The coast guards who could only sit idly by and watch as a clear enemy passed by might be seeing the scene again and again in their nightmares for months."

"Soldiers zealous enough to do that are rare these days. And I am not one of them." Froleytia gave a mocking smile. "But the 24th are finally officially considered our enemy. We can now blow them away with impunity. Even if they are an entire battalion with an Object of their own, they only have one."

"Yes. At the very least, I do not think they have enough strength to handle the entire Legitimacy Kingdom military."

"What about our strength? How many Objects can we use?"

"Three are currently deployed to the Alaska district. Our Baby Magnum, the Snow Quake, and the Active Sledge. In a week's time, it seems 5 more in Europe should be able to cross the Atlantic and reach us."

"…I'm sure those 5 are primarily there because the VIPs on the Council put self-preservation above all else so they want to build a defensive line across the Atlantic. They will not be cooperating with us. Even if our Objects are destroyed, they will be ordered to not take a step in our direction."

Also, it did not take an entire week for Objects that moved at around 500 kph to cross the Atlantic Ocean. They would claim that transporting the equipment needed for the maintenance bases was what was taking so much time, but it was clear what their real reason was. They wanted to keep that large force in the Atlantic Ocean.

"More importantly, the Snow Quake or the Active Sledge are not going to join the 24th's side, are they? We could easily be shot in the back in this situation. Just because they see this disorder in our ranks does not necessarily mean the other forces will take action."

"I am sorry, but do you really think anyone else would agree with the 24th's radical views? Black Uniforms are being sent to those other units for barrier duty, but it is likely a waste of tax money."

"Yes, I guess this is just the crazy ideas of a noble."

"So how shall we carry out the interception of the 24th?"

"Well…"

Froleytia looked over at the giant map attached to the whiteboard. She took the quill sitting on the table and forcefully stabbed the tip into a point on the map as if she was throwing a dart.

"If they continue on, they should end up at Victoria Island. That is where we will blow the Indigo Plasma to pieces."

Part 2

Quenser and Heivia stepped down from the open back of a cargo plane and onto icy land.

They were at a hastily constructed airfield on the Arctic Victoria Island in the northern portion of the Alaska district.

"I can't believe they can land somewhere this frozen. Is this supposed to be a runway? You could play ice hockey on it," said Heivia in shock, but he frantically moved out of the way when a truck horn blared.

Several large military vehicles were driving down the lowered cargo door and onto the runway.

Quenser held his arms around his body for warmth even with his heavy coat on.

"Where's the princess?"

"She got here long ago. We came later to construct the maintenance base. We don't get sent to the front lines every time," said Heivia before bringing a hand to his forehead and staring straight up. "I thought the Indigo Plasma was doing some crazy things, but I never thought that was the infamous Prizewell City Slicker's unit. I hadn't heard much about him for 2 or 3 years now. I wonder when he was scouted and secretly started heading down the path of an Elite."

"Who is he?"

"A hardcore lineage advocate. Basically, he's the stereotypical example of the kind of noble you don't want to have to deal with," cut in Froleytia from the side with her long, thin kiseru in her mouth. She must not have had much to do until the maintenance base was constructed because she looked bored. "Basically, he's an idiot who has mistakenly decided his ultimate objective should be to ensure a set group of people centered around him controls the wars and government. He advocates reinstating the slave class that was utterly abolished a few decades back. He claims the stagnation of the Legitimacy Kingdom economy is due to a lack of a working force."

"He is trying to use language to bring about this reform in social classes. City Slicker is an ardent language preservation activist."

"You mean he discriminates based on whether you can speak the language or not?"

"Yes. City Slicker fears the decay of the Legitimacy Kingdom's official language more than anything else. He is rumored to have been behind a few terrorist attacks involving things such as assassinations of foreign language band members and bombings of foreign language schools. There was never enough evidence, though," said Heivia.

Quenser frowned and said, "It is true that you occasionally hear about languages dying out because not enough people used it and it was not passed on to enough people, but this is the Legitimacy Kingdom's official language City Slicker is talking about, right? It's the official language of one of the major world powers. It isn't going to die out so easily."

"The Legitimacy Kingdom's official language is primarily based on French with influences from the languages of the other European cultures added in. You know that much, right, Quenser? " With a smile, Froleytia tapped her shoulder. A few letters were written on the unit insignia there. "But what language is used on the military's unit insignias?"

"…English."

"Things like military jargon, internet tags, and programming languages are often based around English even now. It is a relic of an age before the arrival of Objects, but I would be lying if I said it wasn't easier to just keep using the existing terminology. But City Slicker will not allow that. Unless everything down to the last restaurant menu is in the Legitimacy Kingdom's official language, he will not be satisfied."

"It sounds more like he's the one destroying a linguistic culture. So did that bastard Nutley shoot us in the back over that?"

"If you add in some clever seasoning, language preservation activism can seem like quite a beautiful thing," Heivia said, grinning. "If nobles and commoners spoke the same language, everyone could get along. Men could get along with women, adults could get along with children, and people of every skin color could get along. If we could just speak to each other in the same language, everyone could smile together. Isn't that just wonderful!? …Their sales pitch is something like that."

"Of course, they don't bring up the reverse side of the coin. That worldview shows that you have no intention of smiling together with those who cannot speak your language. In fact, it shows you do not even intend to treat them like fellow human beings."

"Nutley was black."

"True, but Cookman was black, too. And Myonri was Asian. The Legitimacy Kingdom may be based on the culture of a bygone

era of kings and knights, but black nobles are not exactly rare these days. There doesn't really seem to be a foundation for those words to work off of and lead him astray."

"It does not matter if the foundation actually exists or not. As long as Nutley had even the slightest doubts along those lines, Prizewell City Slicker just had to find them and use them."

"But you also said City Slicker was a lineage advocate…"

"Yes. Just like with the mafia, he surrounds himself with blood relatives. Deep down, he will never trust a stranger. He uses language when choosing his 'pawns'."

That talk left a bitter taste in Quenser's mouth.

City Slicker may have seen it as nothing more than using tactics from his field of expertise.

"He does not care about anyone besides himself," muttered Froleytia in an evaluation of the leader of the 24th. She gently blew out some smoke. "That is why he did not fit in even among the nobles. That made him feel the need to rush things. This entire incident seems to be his attempt to gain more of a right to speak within the Legitimacy Kingdom through his military contributions . Then, he can continue with his language preservation activism. … But you saw what happened. His slaughter of the Faith Organization civilians was stopped and he failed to create the spark he wanted. His information manipulation that was meant to take advantage of the confusion also failed. His political maneuvering was exposed and his influence has plummeted.

Before long, his position as a noble will likely be officially revoked and will be treated as a pitiable 'fallen noble'."

"But he took action before that could happen," muttered Quenser.

Froleytia shrugged lightly and said, "He might be hoping to cross the Atlantic, threaten the Sovereign Parliament, and correct his political trajectory, or he might be hoping to attack an Information Alliance city in eastern America to restore his influence. Whatever he plans to do, it is nothing but a nuisance and the higher ups of the military do not want any of it to happen. After he came so far, I almost feel sorry for him. Not that I intend to hold back," she said offhandedly. "Prizewell City Slicker's goal is not to overthrow the Legitimacy Kingdom. He simply wants to retain his position within the current system. From there, he wants to obtain a position that gives him overwhelming military force that he can use to prod the Sovereign Parliament in the direction of his own views."

"They only have the Indigo Plasma, right?"

"Yes, but this area is something like Prizewell City Slicker's manor. Rumor has it he privately owns an unofficially operated weapons factory somewhere around here. It is possible they were resupplied while on the move and that the Object is now equipped with weapons not in the diagrams we have. If we let our guard down, we could run into a most unwelcome surprise."

"But we have three Objects while they have just the one," said Heivia to Quenser in a joking tone. "Whatever equipment they

may have gained, the numbers are just too different. Our victory is ensured. The only real problem is the bad taste shooting fellow Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers will leave in our mouths."

"Yes, we will almost assuredly achieve victory in the end," agreed Froleytia. "But do not forget that we could take damages in the process. The son of the Winchell family does not intend to get killed by a stray bullet with victory before his eyes, does he?"

Heivia's jocular expression froze in place at Froleytia's cold tone .

Part 3

A few hours later, the maintenance base zone made up of a convoy of large vehicles had been constructed. Froleytia gathered the members of the unit and began the pre-mission briefing.

"The enemy will be here soon." She used a projector to display a map on the screen behind her. "We are up against the 24th Mobile Maintenance Battalion and the Indigo Plasma. There is no need to think of them as fellow Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers. They sullied the name of the Legitimacy Kingdom enough for the Sovereign Parliament to officially declare them an enemy force. To prevent any unnecessary damages such as any to civilians, we must eliminate the unit and its leader Prizewell City Slicker."

This did not cause a stir in the crowd.

They had all clearly seen the true nature of the Indigo Plasma when it tried to slaughter civilians on the Kamchatka Peninsula,

even if those civilians were from an enemy nation. Modern war made a clear distinction between safe countries and battlefields. The true nature of Froleytia and the 37th she commanded had also been made clear when they had led the civilians to the submarines even when doing so had no real merit for her unit. A force that crossed that line had to be destroyed before it could grow any more powerful.

"As its name would suggest, the Indigo Plasma is a Second Generation Object that specializes in the use of low-stability plasma cannons. It is quite powerful on its own, but it seems tactics have been put together for it that include working together with a unit of foot soldiers. …That is because they were part of the Legitimacy Kingdom military. They analyzed our victories and tried to add that into their own force."

A few people in the crowd gave some sarcastic applause, but Quenser was taken aback. He had not been fighting Objects in order to help slaughterers grow more powerful.

To get rid of the heavy atmosphere, Quenser asked, "What exactly will we be doing?"

"Basically, we will take them out here on the coast of Victoria Island. The Baby Magnum and the Snow Quake will obstruct their path on land while the Active Sledge will cut off their retreat on the sea. The 24th will not try to take us on in a straight fight. Their foot soldier unit will likely try something. They have no chance while it is 3 to 1, so they will enact a strategy meant to destroy our unity."

"Is there any information that needs special attention?"

"The 24th is taking this action because they believe they will end up with better odds even than 1 on 1 if we sabotage each other . I doubt the battle will go exactly as they wish it to, but there is a real danger of unnecessary confusion causing damages to spread farther than necessary. If you do not wish to die needlessly in a battle we end up winning, make sure to stay on your guard."

After that, she explained specifically what different units would be doing. More foot soldiers were being deployed than usual. The fact that Froleytia was sending out over 100 foot soldiers showed just how worried she was about the 24th Mobile Maintenance Battalion's foot soldier unit.

When the pre-mission briefing was over, Heivia slipped into the group of soldiers heading for the exit and worked his way over toward Quenser.

"Hey, hero. What area are you headed to?"

"Area F."

"Then we'll be together."

"We're setting bombs along the 24th's route to stop their foot soldiers and vehicles, right?"

"C'mon now, stop that. Reconfirming what we're doing right before we head out is just going to make us more nervous. When did you get to be so smart?"

"I don't want to be treating this like I'm cramming before the night of an entrance exam. Hating things like that was what led me to becoming a battlefield student. But I might die if I don't do it. Rumor has it the Indigo Plasma has had additions using private funds. If that's true, the Legitimacy Kingdom military's blueprint won't be reliable. Just the other day with the Wing Balancer, we saw how dangerous misreading an Object's abilities is."

"…Yeah, no one expected to find an Object that could actually jump," said Heivia in disgust.

As they left the assembly room, they spotted a few unfamiliar men sitting with their backs against the corridor wall. Their clothes made it clear they were not military men. They could only be described as dirty middle-aged men.

As they passed the men, Quenser asked Heivia, "Who are they?"

"The CS broadcast staff I would assume. The one for that military show. We came straight here from the Kamchatka Peninsula. The Black Uniforms withdrew to help with the mission, but there was no time to deal with the TV crew. They have to stick around here until the cargo planes head back to a safe country."

"I'm surprised the media isn't restricted from coming outside while a scandal like this is going on."

"Normally, they would be thrown into detention cells in the name of intelligence preservation. Our huge-breasted commander may be generally frightening, but one of her good points is her ability to be oddly allowing about these kinds of things."

"…But a battle is about to start, right? Is that really okay?"

"How should I know? But they came to a maintenance base on the front lines, so they had to have been prepared for some kind of trouble to occur. At the very least, it would have been written in tiny letters at the bottom of whatever paperwork they signed. Otherwise, that huge-breasted commander would never have allowed it."

(So is she kind or is she not…?)

Quenser turned around once and looked at a cameraman who looked entirely exhausted. Had they been expecting a clean battle between Objects that was like an official sports competition?

However, there would be no point in speaking to them.

Quenser did not have the authority to send them back to a safe country and he could not pilot a cargo plane.

"…Does that mean their star is still here too?" wondered Quenser.

"Oh, she was amazing. She reminded me of a nostalgic idol from the old days. She had white and pink camouflage on. She must have been preparing for a firefight in a glass of strawberry milk."

"I wonder if it would be inconsiderate of me to ask for her signature in this situation."

"You can probably manage it during the confusion of the victory party."

Suddenly, the princess walked around a corner of the corridor while holding a few ration packages. She spotted Quenser and Heivia and approached them.

"Oh, are you on your way to board the Baby Magnum?"

"Ugh, those rations look as disgusting as ever. Hey, how about we go on strike when things are a little more peaceful?"

The princess ignored Heivia's suggestion that could have been interpreted as treason and looked over at Quenser.

"…The old lady was acting oddly."

"Hah?"

"I guess you do not know what is happening either."

The princess gave a heavy sigh. She must have been worried.

Heivia must have overlooked how serious she was taking it because he said, "Everyone gets a little nervous just before a mission. This time there will be a lot of foot soldiers on the front lines in addition to the Objects. Maybe she's worried about us like we're her family."

"Could it really just be that?" said the princess with a puzzled look as she headed to the Object maintenance area.

"…"

Quenser stared at her back as she left, but then…

"Ahn? Hey, Quenser, where are you going? We'll be heading out soon."

"I'm taking a detour."

"I see. Go off and hear out that old lady's worries if you like, but be quick about it."

"I'm not that softhearted. It's just that all these battles have left me with little time to study Object design. I have enough time to make a quick visit to the maintenance area. I need to cram my head full of as much knowledge as I can."

"Enough with the excuses, lady killer. Go make that old woman 's heart go all aflutter."

Ignoring Heivia's one-sided conclusion, Quenser headed for the maintenance area. The princess must have headed for the Object as quickly as she could because he did not catch up to her on the way.

The flow of time felt different inside.

Everything was much, much faster.

The speed at which things and people moved was much greater than normal.

A fair amount of damage had been taken in the battle with the Wing Balancer on the Kamchatka Peninsula. And now they had another battle coming up. They wanted to repair that damage as much as possible. After all…

(We are up against a traitor that has left the Legitimacy Kingdom. The normal rules of war no longer apply. We cannot use the white flag, so a loss means a slaughter.)

It was like there was a cliff one step behind them. The desire to get as much done as possible was understandable.

"Boy," said a voice from behind him.

He turned around and found the old maintenance lady approaching with a toolbox.

"This is an emergency battle preparation. I do not have time to lecture an amateur."

"You're always telling me to steal as much information as I can using my eyes. I came here to test just how much I can absorb during the real deal."

"Hmph," said the old lady before making a motion telling Quenser to follow her and then beginning to walk once more.

As the princess had said, she was not being very talkative. Also, it seemed to be more than just pre-battle jitters. The other maintenance soldiers were in oddly high spirits as they forced themselves into an explosion of activity. Their attitude was the more common one for maintenance soldiers.

The old maintenance lady did not head for the metal framework of scaffolding around the Object's main body. Instead, she headed for a crane a bit away from the Object. It was one of the types used at ports and shipyards that had the operator's seat located a few dozen meters up into the air.

Instead of lowering the crane's operator's seat to the ground, the two of them jumped from scaffolding sticking out into empty air and onto the open area attached around the operator's seat. The method was not exactly good to Quenser's heart.

"Th-this isn't the usual type of crane we use."

"It is a Legitimacy Kingdom military format, but it is one of the pieces of equipment we borrowed from the unit already on Victoria Island. We could hardly fit everything aboard the cargo planes."

That meant a few of the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion's proper vehicles had been left behind on the Kamchatka Peninsula.

As Quenser thought about that, the old maintenance lady tossed him a pair of binoculars.

"You can steal with your eyes best if you're high up, right? Also , we can't have someone who doesn't understand the rhythm of things wandering around down there."

"You sure are harsh…"

Quenser entered the enclosed area that contained the crane's operator's seat.

It was a large area. He felt like an entire 10-person van could fit inside. A single seat was installed in the center and various buttons and levers were installed around it. Also…

"Wow, the floor's transparent. If you threw someone who was afraid of heights in here, they'd probably tell you anything to be let out."

"Cranes like this need some way to see what is going on down below."

"But is this crane really being used? I see an electric hot water dispenser, magazines, sleeping bags, and other small things in here. It looks like people are living in here."

"As I said, we borrowed it. A lot of the equipment they use is not all that useful here. We thought it could at least function as a break room."

"Hmm," said Quenser as he looked around.

There were a lot of tools to kill time scattered about. A few board games were spread out on the floor. He saw a few mechanically-focused magazines he did not recognize strewn about. He also saw a horseracing magazine that let you buy tickets online. It had things highlighted throughout. Amid it all was a digital picture frame. It showed an ephemeral-looking girl with black hair.

Quenser picked it up and asked the old lady, "Whose is this?"

"It's mine."

"Hehh. So is this your daughter? Or your granddaughter?"

"It's me."

"!!!???"

Quenser quickly looked up from the digital picture frame and then back down at the image data.

"…D-do you have the special ability to turn young again on nights with a full moon?"

"You idiot. This was taken a long time ago. You should be able to tell that from the cityscape in the background. That kind of scenery no longer exists on the Japanese Islands."

"Eh…?" Quenser froze in place. "The Japanese Islands?"

The old lady clicked her tongue at that question. She seemed to regret letting that slip out.

Finally, she sighed and said, “I am an immigrant from the Capitalist Corporations. You could even say I was a refugee.”

Yes, the Japanese Islands were Capitalist Corporations territory.

They were actually divided between east and west. The western portion of the islands was controlled by a power that wished for a revival of the Imperial Court system and they had made a large-scale secession to the Faith Organization. The Faith Organization and the Legitimacy Kingdom were in conflict over whose power the Imperial Court system should be reinstated under. Also, the Capitalist Corporations side had their values change whenever maintenance was done to their advanced information infrastructure and they were mocked as beginning to transfer over to a more Information Alliance-like system. All in all, it was a very unclear and possibly explosive situation. However, the Japanese Islands were officially known as belonging to the Capitalist Corporations.

“But as you can clearly see, I am not a pure Asian.”

“Well, they did start letting in a lot of immigrants to combat the effects of the low birthrates and high age of the population.”

“Historically, that is what helped allow the technological information on Objects to spread so widely.”

"So what was this about being a refugee?"

"It was due to my daughter and her husband." Quenser had expected her to refuse, but she answered quite readily. "They did some charitable work. Specifically, they worked to bring steady agricultural technology to areas short of food. They advertised their work with the phrase 'We can save people suffering due to a lack of crops simply by lowering the grade of the convenience store bentos we eat for lunch'. That was what led to us becoming refugees."

"Why? There's nothing wrong with that."

"Oh, yes there is. The Capitalist Corporations is a world power where the economy and the corporations control the government and the wars. A large convenience store group grew angry. They treated it as information terrorism that was applying serious damage to the economy using words. My daughter and her husband were very nearly shot by the police's anti-terror suppression unit."

"…Wow."

"We were left with no option but to move somewhere where the Capitalist Corporations could not reach us. Even so, the Legitimacy Kingdom was hardly a paradise given the importance it puts on lineage. Immigrants with no established lineage are at a disadvantage in everything. To live a proper life, you must have some kind of necessary skills that are enough to blow away those disadvantages."

If she said she had no regrets about leaving the Capitalist Corporations or the Japanese Islands behind, she would probably have been lying. The look on her face made that clear enough. However, she had abandoned it all in order to protect her family. It was possible her life had been a path covered in fights more dangerous than the battle that lay ahead.

"So where did your daughter and her husband end up? The South Great Britain district?"

"…An immigrant residential city on the eastern end of Victoria Island."

As that was right in the middle of the current battlefield, Quenser regretted asking that question.

That must have been why the old lady was acting so oddly.

"During the battles with the Water Strider and the Rush, the city was temporarily evacuated to Europe. They had only just returned after things had calmed down."

"I'm afraid to ask, but how is the evacuation going?"

"Right now, not even the CS staff in the maintenance base have had time to leave. Do you really think there was enough time for an entire city to evacuate?"

Part 4

Quenser was excitedly watching on as the special gas used in the low-stability plasma cannons was loaded into the main cannons, but he got a little too heated up and none of the crucial technological information made it into his head. Wondering why his studying was not going well, Quenser left the maintenance area and met up with Heivia who had just finished cleaning the inside of his rifle's barrel.

"Hey, Quenser, did you get the old lady to fall for you?"

"It seems that old lady has lived a fairly heavy life. But with how much Froleytia is obsessed with Japan, her eyes would probably light up with excitement hearing that story."

"Ahn?"

Heivia looked puzzled, but there was no time to explain further. He and Quenser could not take things easy any longer.

They had used the cargo planes to circle around ahead of the expected path for the Indigo Plasma, so the enemy would surely be coming. Lazing around would leave them at a serious disadvantage.

When they left the barracks that were constructed from those large vehicles, a middle-aged lieutenant was allocating the troops. They were being split into teams which then boarded different vehicles.

"Teams A through D will use the helicopters, and Teams E through H will use the trucks! Team I, you have a covert mission, so you use the electric snowmobiles! Before leaving, make sure to check the chains as well as the decibels they produce while running!!"

"Oh, god. We're stuck with the trucks. That's the most unrefined option. They treat us like we're potatoes."

"We're fighting an Object that's equipped with tons of anti-air lasers, so I'd say the trucks are better than the transport helicopters ."

"True. And they fly too low for parachutes to be of any use."

"I heard a rumor that they were developing a unit that lowered your fall speed by ejecting water using compressed air. Do you know if that's true?"

The middle-aged lieutenant yelled at them for chatting, so Quenser and Heivia frantically ran over to climb into the back of the military truck headed to Area F. Over 20 soldiers climbed aboard the covered bay of the truck.

"Quenser, a guy over here has a deck of cards. Let's play poker to kill time."

"I have no interest in playing when I have nothing to bet."

"But you suck at poker," spat out Heivia before joining the poker group.

Quenser blankly thought while watching the frozen landscape through a gap in the cloth covering the back of the truck.

(If I tried to keep track of numbers with this truck shaking so much, I think I'd get carsick in no time.)

Part 5

"Shut up. I don't care about your situation. Continue the mission like normal!!"

Twenty minutes later, the soldiers were close to vomiting thanks to carsickness. The response they got from Froleytia was more or less what Quenser had expected.

"…Dammit. I didn't need another reminder that our huge-breasted commander is a real sadist," said Heivia.

"This was your own fault."

"Don't act so blameless. If you knew this would happen, you could have warned us."

"I am not one to speak out against how others use their personal time."

Almost half of those getting out of the stopped military truck were carsick. Those who had not taken part in the card game and those with a higher endurance were fine.

Quenser pulled some Hand Axe plastic explosive out of his bag and said, "I'll set up the explosives along the road here. You go take some deep breaths while keeping watch."

The higher ups seemed to have learned their lesson at the Kamchatka Peninsula because the radios they had been issued this time were much more powerful. Just the one Quenser had could cover a wide area.

Quenser was setting up explosives along a single small road cutting a line down the vast snowy plain. The road was not paved. It was nothing more than hard-packed dirt.

In vast areas of nothingness like that, people had a great tendency to head along roads or other paths. Fallen trees and sharp rocks threatened to puncture a tire and the tires could get stuck in a muddy patch.

In a freezing Arctic area with nothing as far as the eye could see, the risk brought by such troubles was unimaginable.

"If you're so clever, what do you plan to do if they jam the signal, making those useless?"

"The point of the bombs is not to blow up all of the targets," replied Quenser. "The trick is to throw doubt into their minds so they do not know where explosives might be set up. The more fearful they are of bombs, the less freedom they have in their actions. As that continues, we can keep getting the first attack. These just need to stop them from moving. Naturally, the battle will be ended by the princess."

"I see. Ugh… Damn. Maybe I'd feel better if I just vomited once."

Heivia crouched down groaning, but Quenser ignored him and got back to his work. He stabbed electric fuses into the Hand Axe and buried it in the unpaved road. As the purpose was to frighten the 24th's foot soldier unit and then retrieve them later to ensure a clean battlefield, it was most effective to purposefully cover it up with dirt and snow.

"A clean battlefield, hm? That really is a phrase for the ones with all the power. It wasn't too long ago that we were fighting Objects."

"Are you in such a bad mood because you feel like vomiting? The times change from moment to moment. I hear the evacuated residents have already returned to the prefab city to the east."

"Is this really okay? There are rumors that the soldiers abandoned when the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance militaries evacuated from the Alaska district have built igloos out in the snowy plain…Ugh."

What they were preparing was not exactly meant to finish off the front line soldiers. If they saw any sign that the enemy foot soldier unit was coming to directly attack the maintenance base zone, the enemy vehicles on the road would be blown away or stopped. In the time that this bought, they could build up their defenses further.

"Let's go. We need to seal up another route."

"What if the 24th gets scared and decides to avoid the road?"

"There are fallen trees, sharp rocks, holes hidden by snow, and muddy patches. We just have to pray they get caught in those natural traps. Also, they have no idea what rules we used when setting up these bombs. They will be afraid regardless of which route they take, and that will slow them down."

The carsick group was reluctant to get back on the military truck, but they were forced back on. Quenser and the others then headed out along the unpaved road once more. Each time they stopped at an intersection that connected multiple routes, they would set up explosives.

"It's the princess."

Heivia was staring off into the distance. Quenser looked over and saw the 50+ meter mass of metal heading their way. It had been forced into a harsh battle against the Wing Balancer on the Kamchatka Peninsula, but its maintenance seemed to have been completed en route. It looked as good as new.

Quenser and the others waved and the princess must have picked it up on the cameras because she waved a main cannon back at them. She headed on to the coast in order to wait for the Indigo Plasma.

Quenser lowered his raised hand and said, "Where are the other Objects. If I recall, the Snow Quake is going to attack the traitor from land."

"Over there."

Quenser looked in the direction Heivia was pointing and spotted a giant form passing by on higher ground a few kilometers away. There was not much something that large could do about it, but it seemed to be giving no thought whatsoever to hiding from enemy eyes as it moved. As a foot soldier who could be killed by a single bullet, Quenser was jealous.

"The Active Sledge is likely approaching along the sea route the Indigo Plasma is thought to have used. I don't see how this can go wrong."

"We've set up all the bombs, so what do we do now?"

"We join Teams A through D. That means exterminating the 24th's foot soldier unit that is hiding around the Indigo Plasma in the hopes of sabotaging us in some way. It'll be a lively firefight filled with mud and soot."

"In that case, I kind of wish someone would give me a gun. I'm a student; I don't have anything to protect myself with."

"Yeah, well, I'm a radar analyst. Radar! Do you see any radars around here!? And yet that huge-breasted commander of ours is probably getting pizza delivered right about now!!"

Quenser and Heivia continued complaining as they began moving. They were only a few kilometers away from the front line on the coast. Once that close, it would be more dangerous to use the trucks which would show up as large metal objects on an

Object's radar. The 20+ soldiers of Team F split into 2-4 man groups and headed toward the coast with each group waiting to head out until some time had passed from the last group heading out.

"Wait, why are we the first group to head out?"

"Let's just assume it means they think we're reliable. The ones coming up behind us are the ducklings."

"And that brings me back to wishing I had a gun. If I just had two handguns, I bet I could start shooting enemy soldiers 360 degrees around me."

"Quenser, Heivia," said Froleytia over their radios. "Cut the pointless chatter and get going. Team B has engaged the 24th's foot soldiers."

(Why do our radios have bidirectional mode on!?)

With that thought, Quenser and Heivia grimaced. That meant she had heard all of their complaining. Froleytia's tone seemed colder than usual.

"Team B is having a bit of trouble, so go help them to earn some battlefield friendship."

"What a pain."

"Tell those side characters not to die before the protagonists arrive."

A low rumble reverberated across the snowy land of Victoria Island. The Baby Magnum had likely begun fighting the Indigo Plasma at the coast.

"Hey, Quenser. This battle'll be over before long anyway, so don't you think it would be wisest to dig a random hole somewhere and hide until then?"

"Afterwards, Froleytia would probably beat the shit out of you, so I can hardly call that a safe plan."

As they were about to pass over a low hill, Quenser and Heivia slowly got down on the ground. The coast lay directly ahead. Beyond about 300 meters of gently-sloping land was the white, frozen sea.

And on the coast, they saw…

"There they are. It looks like 20 of ours against 20 enemies."

The sounds of the Objects firing almost drowned it out, but Heivia was watching a firefight. Team B must have had its helicopters shot down just before they landed, because they were holding rifles while hiding behind a few helicopters that were lying on their side. The soldiers from the 24th were using 4WD vehicles and armored vehicles for cover.

The 24th's foot soldiers' uniforms were not the standard Legitimacy Kingdom uniforms. They wore octopus-like protective masks and short but wide suits that made the contours of their bodies unclear.

As Quenser watched the firefight from the side like a tennis umpire, he said, "What are those? Powered suits?"

"If so, they wouldn't be using cover. They'd be headed straight towards Team B. They're probably just some kind of protective suit."

"…They aren't going to use germs or poison gas, are they?"

"Those suits don't look airtight enough for that. It might be for some kind of flamethrower. They look a lot like firefighters."

Quenser then noticed large gas cylinders on their backs. A hose was attached to the back of their large rifles. If it was not oxygen, it must have had something like naphtha for a flamethrower. Quenser did not want to think about the possibility, but it was possible the gun barrel doubled as a flamethrower nozzle.

"But…"

Heivia adjusted his grip on his rifle as he lay on the ground, switched on the various sensors he needed for midrange sniping, and attached a suppressor that was about as large as a 500 milliliter bottle.

"Time to get to work. Let's work hard so we can get that large-breasted commander to kindly tread on us later."

"There's nothing for me to do."

"Use your binoculars to confirm where my bullets hit."

"You don't seem too bothered by the fact that this is a fight with the Legitimacy Kingdom on both sides."

"This is a fight between our enemies and our allies. I can't speak for everyone, but I certainly feel no sympathy for them. It's the same as when we fought Flide."

"We sure have gotten stronger. I miss when you were trembling as you looked through the scope in Alaska."

Heivia ignored him and pulled the trigger.

The 24th's cover was a line of vehicles parallel to the coast, so it only functioned as a shield against the soldiers beyond it. It had no effect against Heivia's sniper shot from the side.

With the muffled sound of firing, one of the protective-suit-wearing soldiers was knocked to the side as he hid behind an armored vehicle.

"What the hell?" Heivia frowned and looked at the barrel of his rifle. "This cheap piece of junk. It let out too much noise."

The counterattack came immediately thereafter.

A great roar of gunfire rang out. Quenser and Heivia frantically crawled backwards to use the hill as cover. The 24th knew exactly where they were. However, if they tried to escape Heivia's sharpshooting by heading to the other side of the vehicles they were using as cover, they would expose themselves to fire from Team B.

It was a stereotypical example of crossfire.

With nowhere to run, the 24th's soldiers were sinking into the snow-covered earth in no time at all. With Heivia continuing his sharpshooting, it took less than 5 minutes to suppress them.

Heivia removed the suppressor from his rifle barrel and said, " Suppression complete. I will commend them for not having a single person raise their hands to surrender."

"Let's go check their radios. They use the same type as we do, so we can intercept their transmissions if we know the frequency and encryption method they use."

"Digging through their corpses right after a firefight? You've come a long way, too."

While remaining on the lookout for any remaining snipers, Quenser and Heivia headed down to Team B. They then checked the defeated 24th foot soldiers and the vehicles they had been using for cover. However, they were not able to obtain what they needed to intercept the enemy's transmissions. The radios were locked with a passcode.

"These gas cylinders still bother me."

Quenser looked over at the gas cylinders on the backs of the 24th's foot soldiers. The hose connected to their rifles and the gun barrel seemed to double as the nozzle. It really did seem to be some kind of flamethrower.

"There were similar tanks in the vehicles. And they weren't just to refill the ones the soldiers have. There's a turret on the roof like a water truck used for riot control. The vehicles were clearly made to spray whatever's inside."

"But why?" Quenser frowned. "It wouldn't have any effect against an Object that can withstand a nuclear explosion. Or were they trying to directly attack our maintenance base zone?"

"How should I know? Technically, we don't even know if it's really a flamethrower."

A great roar rang out.

【インディゴ・プラズマ】
INDIGO PLASMA

全長… 140メートル（主砲含む）

最高速度… 時速580キロ

装甲… 1センチ×1000層（溶接など不純物含む）

用途… 対オブジェクト用駆逐兵器

分類… 換装式水陸両用第二世代

運用者…『正統王国』第24機動整備大隊

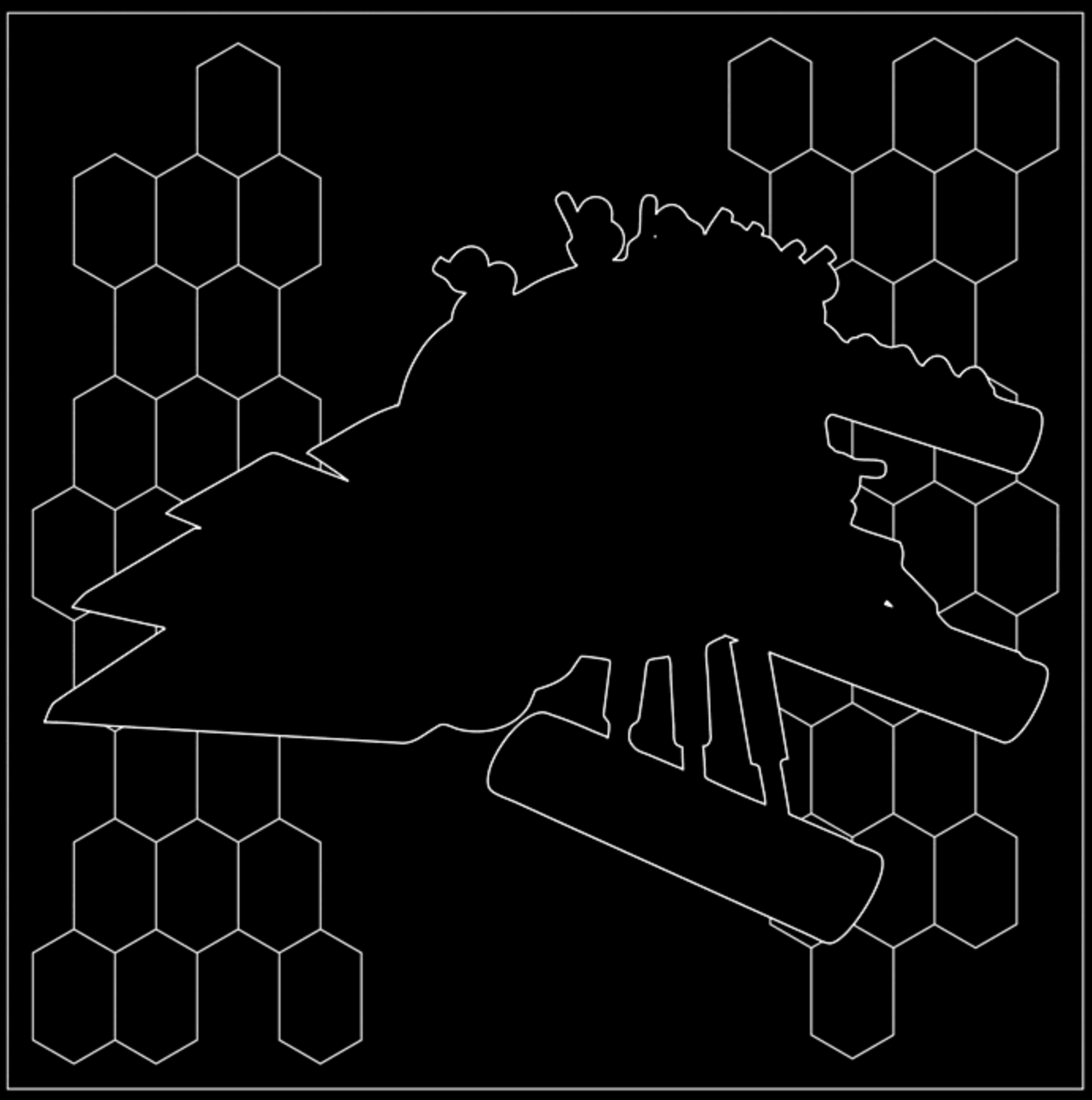
仕様… 静電気式推進システム（プラズマ式加速システム）

主砲… 下位安定式プラズマ砲

副砲… レールガン、コイルガンなど

コードネーム… インディゴプラズマ
（下位安定式プラズマ砲を兵装の至る所へ利用しているため）

メインカラーリング… ディープブルー



INDIGO PLASMA

As the Baby Magnum, Snow Quake, and Indigo Plasma continued to battle, they were moving slowly closer.

The Indigo Plasma.

As its name suggested, that Second Generation Object had been developed to draw out as much power from low-stability plasma cannons as possible. All of its 100+ weapons were a threat, but the two main cannons sticking out parallel to each other from the front of the Object were the most characteristic aspect of the machine. What seemed to be spare tanks to supply the special gas required were lined up on the side.

Its propulsion device used static electricity just like the princess. It used two ski-like parts on the front and five on the back to move as if sliding across the ground.

However, there was an overwhelming difference in speed. Even while trapped between the Baby Magnum and the Snow Quake, the Indigo Plasma seemed to dance around the other two Objects.

"What the hell? Its output must be insanely high."

"It uses static electricity to keep afloat like the princess, but it uses a different method to detonate the air and move forward. It uses low-stability plasma cannon tech for that," said Quenser as he checked on his handheld device.

The Indigo Plasma was a Legitimacy Kingdom Object. Its basic design was stored in the database.

Heivia frowned and said, "If it's that useful, I wish they'd let our princess use it."

"It gives excellent speed, but it brings up heat-resistance issues. Basically, it produces too much heat. The Indigo Plasma seems to get over that with some electronic control, but it would normally result in melting the bottom of the Object."

"…Wait, I thought it specialized in working alongside foot soldiers. It looks like it's sending out some tremendous blasts of blazing wind. The foot soldiers would be wiped out by that."

They were only able to speak so calmly about it because they had two Objects on their side. The Indigo Plasma was indeed powerful. The princess could not keep up when it came to speed. However, the Indigo Plasma would not be able to keep fighting unless it kept up that high speed constantly.

Keeping up that extremely high speed would cause the Elite piloting the Object to suffer. Other than some rare exceptions like the Information Alliance's Rush, those monstrous weapons were piloted by humans. If the pilot was worn down via physical exhaustion, the movements of the Object would dull. Once the Indigo Plasma's movements fell below an acceptable level, the princess and the Snow Quake would not hesitate to destroy the traitor with their main cannons.

Just as Quenser and Heivia were thinking that, they heard an electronic beep.

Before they could check to see where it was coming from, they heard a noise similar to a gas line being twisted open. The noise seemed to come from all around them and a strange smell reached their noses. It was a stink similar to melting plastic.

"Cough cough!? Hey, Quenser, what is this!?"

"Shit, it's the corpses of the 24th's foot soldiers!! Something's coming out of the rifle barrels acting as nozzles for the gas cylinders! And from the vehicles!!"

"How!? Corpses can't operate nozzles!!"

"How should I know!? Maybe someone opened them via remote control!!"

The air at Quenser's feet wavered like sugar water being mixed. It seemed to be some kind of colorless and transparent gas.

"Dammit, is this some kind of chemical weapon!?"

"If they were using some kind of special gas, just a condom's worth would kill us ten times over! This is something else! It seems to be heavier than the air, so let's run up onto that hill over there!!"

Hearing Quenser's words, Heivia gestured to tell the other soldiers to get to the hill. Then the two boys began to run. The 40+ soldiers of Teams B and F followed. They were about 300 meters from the top of the hill.

Quenser grimaced as he tried to shake off the horrible smell that was clinging to his uniform.

(It can't be…)

Those gas cylinders had not contained poison gas or flammable gas.

The Indigo Plasma used low-stability plasma cannons for its main cannons.

That weapon used the massive amounts of electricity produced by the reactor to artificially create high temperature plasma out of a special gas.

(You've gotta be kidding me!!)

Due to a difference in muscular strength, Heivia reached the top of the hill first. He turned around and looked at Quenser with a relieved expression as he gasped for breath.

Quenser shoved the other boy down with all his strength.

Quenser then leapt over to the other side of the hill.

"Gweh!? Dammit, what're you-…!?"

"Get down!!" Quenser shouted to the other soldiers while ignoring Heivia's complaint. "The 24th's foot soldiers were scattering the special gas for a low-stability plasma cannon!! It will detonate in response to the Object firing its cannons!!"

One of the Indigo Plasma's cannons moved slightly as it continued to fight.

It was one of the smallest cannons it had.

It was being used almost as an afterthought in a gap in the main fight.

Nevertheless…

An explosive beam of light shot towards the coast.

When the low-stability plasma cannon struck, the entire area the gas had been spread over blew up all at once.

Had it been 100 meters? 200 meters? 300 meters?

Quenser was not sure how far the blast had spread. He had more pressing issues. Painful shocks stabbed into his eyeballs and eardrums simultaneously. His arms and legs convulsed, preventing him from even writhing around. His back bent of its own accord and it took him a while to remember how to straighten it out. He even lost track of which way was up.

And yet it could have been worse. Given the wind, the special gas should have covered a larger area. There must have been an ideal concentration for an explosion.

"Kh…hah…"

He could not speak properly. His throat was dry.

Quenser forced his throat to move and just barely managed to suck in some air. He looked around. The snow on top of the hill had been blown away and some of the ground hidden below it had melted slightly. He could not imagine what it must have been like on the other side of the hill. There had definitely been enough energy to turn the dirt and sand into another material altogether.

"Heivia. Hey, Heivia. Are you alive?"

"…God dammit. I think that Elite is the type who scorches the meat black when grilling."

"Please stop talking about food when we have nothing but those flavorless rations."

With that annoyed comment, Quenser grabbed Heivia's arm and helped him up. None of the other soldiers from Teams B or F stood up.

"Don't tell me they were all taken out…" muttered Quenser blankly, but Heivia approached one of the collapsed soldiers and checked on his condition.

"He wasn't taken out by the heat. The shockwave just knocked him unconscious. He does look a bit burned, but it isn't even enough to leave a scar."

"Heivia, can you take care of first aid? I'm going to contact the princess. If I don't tell her how the 24th's foot soldiers are being used, she could be hit by low-stability plasma from a blind spot!!"

"Wait, that was targeting the princess!?"

"I'm sure that's what the equipment is for. The Indigo Plasma holds the enemy's attention while the foot soldiers spread around the special gas. Once an area has been regulated to the proper concentration, it can be detonated as an invisible bomb to bare its fangs against the Object from an unexpected direction. That is how the 24th uses its foot soldiers!!"

At the same time, another giant explosion occurred beyond the hill. A flash of light and explosive noise blasted out, and Quenser and Heivia were knocked down by the shockwave that swept across the ground. They had the hill to act as a wall and were still quite a distance away from the Objects. Nevertheless, those shockwaves that were nothing more than side effects squeezed painfully at Quenser and Heivia's bodies.

"Shit…Were we too late!?"

Quenser stood up on unsteady legs and headed for the top of the hill.

A large area hundreds of meters across had been torn up on the other side of the hill. The area was glowing orange. Once it cooled, the ground could very well turn to glass. Walking over to that area would be a good way to get oneself burned to death.

And…

Quenser stood still and looked through his binoculars. A few kilometers ahead, the three Objects were battling. A similar orange

crater existed below the Snow Quake. Serious damage must have been done to the Snow Quake's propulsion device because its movements were dulled. The Indigo Plasma's two main cannons were accurately aimed at it.

The Baby Magnum slammed into the side of the Snow Quake.

The Snow Quake's static electricity device that kept it afloat must have still been functioning because its 200,000 ton mass slid to the side without resistance. The dynamic scene was almost humorous in how it looked like a giant game of billiards.

The Indigo Plasma's main cannons moved slightly in the next instant.

(Not good…!)

In the instant after Quenser frantically took his eyes away from the binoculars, a flash of light stabbed into his retinas. Having immediately taken evasive actions, the Baby Magnum was merely scratched. Some of its armor was blown away and one of its seven main cannons melted like a sugar sculpture.

"Dammit!! Why is she so softhearted!?"

Quenser used both hands to protect his face from the shockwave that arrived belatedly.

Compared to the explosions from before, it was nothing much. He was not knocked from his feet. There was a difference in the strength of shockwave and heat between an explosion that spread

out evenly in every direction and one that was focused in a different direction by a cannon.

The Indigo Plasma's special combo had failed.

And the Baby Magnum and the Snow Quake were not going to take it sitting down.

The Indigo Plasma frantically resumed its high speed movements, but it was receiving fire from the other two Objects' main cannons. It just barely managed to avoid having its central reactor hit, but a large portion was gouged out of the side of the spherical main body.

(Are they going to pull it off…?)

The severe damage to the Snow Quake's propulsion device was a problem, but the Active Sledge was approaching from the sea to help. The two Objects used all their installed cannons and the princess was gaining the upper hand in the battle. The Indigo Plasma would soon be destroyed.

Or so Quenser thought.

He then heard some unbelievable words over his radio coming from a controller back at the base.

"The Active Sledge has been destroyed!!"

"…What?"

"I repeat, the Active Sledge has been greatly damaged and has sunk!! The pilot Elite is confirmed to have escaped. The Object cannot continue fighting!!"

"How!?" shouted Quenser as he grabbed at his radio. "The Indigo Plasma was supposed to be the 24th's only Object!! So how was the Active Sledge sunk!?"

"I do not know. It was suddenly blown away. We are checking the satellite imagery as we speak!!"

"Shit," swore Quenser as he pulled out his handheld device.

He could view the GPS map, too. He called up the data on the area of sea the Active Sledge had been passing through. Sure enough, the friendly Object had disappeared. It had sunk to the bottom of the ocean.

What Quenser *could* see was something he simply could not understand.

He saw 6 giant forms.

As if to replace the Active Sledge, six shapes just as large as the Active Sledge could be seen.

That was what had blown away the friendly Object.

Quenser could not believe it, but they could only be…

"Are all these 6 things…Objects…?" gasped Quenser.

He then heard the controller speaking from his radio.

"We went back through the footage and checked. They came from the sea. They rose up from within the sea!! Radar signals on the sea are attenuated by the thick ice, so they have difficulty reaching the waters below. The satellite and radar have difficulty staying in focus when trying to target an Object in the sea. We should have been on our guard for submarines coming from the sea!!"

"From the sea?" Heivia looked like he had just heard a really bad joke. "What do you mean from the sea!? Did these Objects take a replicant inspiration from orcas or dolphins!?"

"Dammit…"

As he stood atop the hill, Quenser looked blankly off into the distance.

He could see something gigantic approaching beyond the white horizon.

"I can see them!? They really are Objects. The 24th really does have 6 more Objects in addition to the Indigo Plasma!!"

The overall silhouette was similar to the Indigo Plasma's. The two main cannons had been reduced to one and the 5 ski-like parts on the back had been reduced to two, but the design was still basically the same.

And an Object was an Object.

No one could stop their advance.

The six Objects forcefully broke through the ice covering the ocean surface in a straight path for Victoria Island. They had isosceles triangle-shaped floats for moving along the sea, but they automatically detached when they approached the beach. With a thick metallic noise, the six Objects separated from the floats and smoothly moved up onto land and to the front line of the battlefield.

Quenser and the others could not do anything.

There was nothing they could even hope to do.

As the Objects approached, Quenser leaped to the side. He lay flat on the ground and placed his hands over the back of his head. The 50+ meter machine passed by relatively nearby. It paid him no heed whatsoever.

"Heivia? Hey, what is it? Pull yourself together!!" shouted Quenser.

Heivia remained on the ground, refusing to stand up. His arms and legs were trembling eerily. Six new Objects had joined the battle. Heivia was in a state of shock at the new development.

Even as he shook Heivia's shoulder, Quenser's mental state was pushed to its limits.

He had no idea what had happened.

He could not understand what they had done wrong to end up in that situation.

He started having trouble breathing and it felt like the connections between thoughts in his mind started to snap.

But…

The seven Objects of the 24th Mobile Maintenance Battalion took action to end the battle before anyone had time to think.

First, they fired through the Snow Quake that's movements had dulled due to its damaged propulsion device.

Now that it was isolated after losing its two friendly Objects, the Baby Magnum was attacked.

Even with the power of an Object, it was left helpless while on its own.

Low-stability plasma cannons fired from multiple directions at staggered intervals ripped away piece after piece of the princess's armor. It lost all ability to function in less than 60 seconds.

(This is insane…)

Quenser could not even force out his voice.

The Objects had been destroyed before he could even think about assisting.

The destruction had not had the same impression of overwhelming and savage violence that Objects had had up until then. It was pure division of labor. It had even had a bit of the same empty feeling as when a giant cake is evenly sliced up so that a single slice can be brought to your table.

(So this is how the 24th fights. It's just too fast. It's so over-optimized that you can't read any human emotion in it at all.)

After having turned the two Objects to scrap metal scattered across the snowy plain, the seven Objects of the 24th Mobile Maintenance Battalion calmly left the battlefield.

"What…?" muttered Quenser blankly. "Why didn't they finish off the princess?"

The seven Objects of the 24th had thoroughly stripped away the Baby Magnum's outer shell, but they had not destroyed the reactor or cockpit in the center. They could have easily destroyed it if they had wanted to, but they had spared her.

Quenser could see no logical reason for doing so.

However, the answer came to him from a surprising source.

It came from Quenser's radio.

Part 6

A staticky voice came over the radio.

However, the joy in the deep, male voice could be heard even through the static.

"To all my respected allies in the Legitimacy Kingdom military. This is Prizewell City Slicker, the Elite of the Legitimacy Kingdom military's 24th Mobile Maintenance Battalion."

In her officer's room back in the maintenance base zone, Froleytia grimaced.

"It seems there has been a bit of a misunderstanding, so allow me to make an announcement that should clear everything up. We are not enemies of the Legitimacy Kingdom. We have taken action to ensure the victory of the Legitimacy Kingdom in this worldwide war."

As the CS broadcast reporter girl ate canned lasagna in the passageway, she looked over at the radios of the soldiers heading around on patrol.

"Needless to say, the driving force behind war is the economy. And the Legitimacy Kingdom's economy has stagnated. Why is that? It is caused by a lack of speed at which information spreads throughout the Legitimacy Kingdom."

The old maintenance lady stopped working on her preparations for a pit stop in the Object maintenance area.

"The Legitimacy Kingdom has an official language, and yet we continue to use a great diversity of languages at once. That is lowering the speed at which information spreads. The world

economy changes minute by minute and second by second, so that slight delay causes vital losses. If the Legitimacy Kingdom is to continue fighting and to achieve victory in the end, we must do something about this problem."

The 24th had 7 Objects and had destroyed the Baby Magnum, Snow Quake, and Active Sledge.

Prizewell spoke with great strength as if to emphasize that advantage.

"In other words, we must exterminate those other languages."

His tone seemed to declare that there was no one who could argue with him.

It was a proud declaration that his 7 Objects could breach the 5 Objects protecting the Atlantic Ocean as the Legitimacy Kingdom's second line of defense.

"The proper language will bring about the proper economy. The speed at which information spreads will improve and we will be able to keep up with the ever-changing world economy. …This also means that those who do not speak the proper language have no right to take part in the economy."

His were the words of a ruling class.

No matter what would happen, his position could not waver. It did not matter what troubles that caused for those around him. His was the tone of a man who felt that way.

"And that is why I must act. I must redistribute the proper citizens of the Legitimacy Kingdom to their proper place while putting the others in their proper place as well."

However, he could not be stopped.

The overwhelming military might that 7 Objects gave him meant he could get away with any atrocity he wished.

"This redistribution will be carried out based upon the bare minimum of what is needed for the Legitimacy Kingdom: a proper language."

Froleytia heard a controller say something about the Objects approaching.

"All units evacuate!! The enemy is after the ability to maintain the Object. They did not care about our flesh-and-blood soldiers from the very beginning!! Everyone is to leave the buildings and the base zone ASAP!!"

"Those who speak the proper language will be accepted as citizens. Those who cannot speak it but are putting all their efforts into learning it will be granted the right to live as slave laborers. … However, those who cannot speak it and make no effort to learn it are not worth wasting the Legitimacy Kingdom's resources on. I have no intention of allowing such parasites to exist."

Numerous low-stability plasma cannons fired on the maintenance base zone.

The bombardment had been given after a plentiful delay.

He did not intend to kill those inside.

After all, they were all from the Legitimacy Kingdom military.

(Did he give us time to escape in order to prove he is just!?)

Froleytia gritted her teeth as she watched the base zone erupt into a sea of flames.

"I have already transmitted the necessary report to the highest institution in the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Sovereign Parliament. The sovereigns who rule the people need only do as the report says and carry out a language test in schools all across the Legitimacy Kingdom. If they do so, we will have no need to cross the Atlantic Ocean to have direct talks in the European home country."

The giant forms of the 7 Objects passed by the remains of the ruined base zone. Afterwards, the trucks transporting the 24th's foot soldiers and the bare minimum of maintenance vehicles met up with them. It looked like a victory parade.

They were all smiling.

Some of them aimed their guns at Froleytia and the other helpless people from the 37th and then jokingly pretended to pull the trigger.

They were no longer the 24th Mobile Maintenance Battalion from the Legitimacy Kingdom's military database.

The size of the force and the morals of the troops were simply not the same.

It was simply not normal for a single battalion to have 7 Objects.

"However, we have a plan in case you refuse," continued the enemy as they passed by. "We will carry out a small military exercise to ensure you understand just how serious we are and just how powerful we are."

A military exercise.

That term had a truly horrible ring to it.

The traitors made it very clear who they would be targeting with their 7 Objects.

"There is an immigrant residential city located on the eastern end of Victoria Island in the Alaska district. As those living there have come from lands under the control of other world powers, they are merely a burden that has no intention of becoming a part of our culture. We will begin by carrying out an exercise using them so that you may understand the vision we strive for. Depending on your answer, the same thing may happen in Europe . We beg the Sovereign Parliament to take the results of these actions into account when deciding on their answer to us."

Prizewell City Slicker stated his goal.

It was not a war.

The other side did not possess the military strength needed to resist.

And he was well aware of that fact.

"We will now carry out this exercise using our seven Objects to demonstrate the power of an attack performed using multiple Objects. Also, these seven are not our only force. A second group is nearing completion in manufacturing plants."

They held an overwhelming military force.

They exhibited more power than any individual should possess.

"We have also developed a system to efficiently mass produce Elites. The proper language will provide proper knowledge. These results are a clear demonstration of our ideals."

It was quite the demonstration.

And Prizewell City Slicker summed it all up in his next statement.

"Those who use the proper language shall be citizens, those who cannot use it but work towards learning it shall be slaves, and those who cannot use it and have no intention of learning it shall receive death. That is the only way for the Legitimacy Kingdom economy to grow and lead us to victory."

The transmission ended there.

All that was left now was a large-scale slaughter.

Most of those who came from other cultures would be unable to speak the official Legitimacy Kingdom language. That was to be expected and it was no real problem. However, a language preservation activist like Prizewell would not allow it. His love for the "proper language" would lead him to mercilessly fire the Object's cannons at just a slight error in intonation.

And he was also a lineage advocate. He would never accept immigrants who had come from elsewhere. In his vision, those people would be forced to choose between being subordinates, slaves, or dead.

(Can we get reinforcements from the home country…?)

For a split second, Froleytia considered that, but she then shook her head. In all likelihood no additional Objects would come. Now that all of the Objects in the Alaska district had been taken out, the higher ups in the home country would definitely put their own safety above all else. The current situation left the efficacy of the defensive line on the Atlantic in doubt. No matter how many Objects the home country had, they would all be sent to defend the Atlantic. They would never be sent to the Alaska district.

(But we cannot allow the 24th to carry out this atrocity.)

The situation looked grim, but Froleytia grabbed her radio. She set the frequency and contacted her subordinates who were scattered around the area.

"Quenser, Heivia!! Can you tell how much damage was done to the Objects!?"

"It seems the Elite ejected from the Snow Quake. The princess was able to stick with it. Her armor is in pieces, but it seems she can still move."

"Understood. If our control equipment is still functioning, we can monitor the data. Maintenance soldiers!! Dig up as much usable equipment as you can find in the rubble!!"

A flustered maintenance soldier replied to Froleytia's command .

"Eh? Wait a second. Eh?"

"Load up as many vehicles as you can and carry out the pit stop directly on the front line!! No matter how much of an advantage they have, only the Baby Magnum has a chance of stopping the 24th's Objects!! We need to repair the Baby Magnum to as close as working as possible before those nutjobs attack the city!!"

"No, no!! Please wait. …Hey, what is going on!? Where did the chief go!?"

That last bit seemed to be directed at someone other than Froleytia.

Froleytia frowned and asked, "What happened?"

"I'm sorry, but we can't seem to find the chief!!"

Froleytia looked over at the surrounding sea of flames with a bitter expression.

"…Did she not get away in time?"

"N-no, she did!! She was here just a second ago!! We were all listening to City Slicker's transmission…or rather, declaration of war together!! But we looked away for an instant and-…!!"

(…Wait.)

Froleytia narrowed her eyes slightly when she heard that.

"That old lady wasn't originally from the Legitimacy Kingdom, was she? I recall hearing that she is an immigrant from the Capitalist Corporations' Japanese Islands."

"Y-yes. What about it?"

"What about her daughter and son-in-law?"

The maintenance soldier did not respond to Froleytia's question .

She asked again.

"She didn't come alone, right? She had her daughter, son-in-law , and granddaughter with her. Where do they live? Where in the vast Legitimacy Kingdom do they live!?"

The maintenance soldier still did not respond.

However, it seemed Froleytia's fears got across to him.

"It can't be…" he said.

"The immigrant residential city. This is an unpleasant coincidence." Froleytia took a deep breath and scratched at her head with one hand. "What does that old lady hope to do against 7 Objects!?"

Part 7

Quenser's face paled when he heard the transmission from Froleytia.

"So that old lady headed off to save her family in the immigrant residential city!?"

"Yes. Honestly, she's lucky the Black Uniforms are elsewhere. If they had caught her, she would have been shot on sight."

From the sound of her voice, Froleytia must have been utterly shocked. She seemed to have thought she only had two people in her unit stupid enough to do something like that.

"I will be sending the maintenance unit's vehicles to where you are. Help treat the wounded and make the necessary preparations. Check for any remaining enemy soldiers and use explosives to blow away any obstacles that will get in the vehicles' way. Understand?"

"Will we make it in time?"

"It won't be easy, but luckily the 24th's Objects are travelling along with the foot soldiers. They have to match the speed of the military trucks and armored vehicles. If we can repair the princess' s propulsion device, she might be able to catch up. That is why we need to keep the time loss to an absolute minimum. Do not cut corners in these preliminary preparations."

The transmission ended there.

However, Quenser and the others had nothing more to do. The wounded had already been treated, and they could see no obstacles across the vast snowy plain. All they could do was stay put.

"Hey, Quenser!! I heard that transmission. What do you think about what our giant-breasted commander said!?"

"Does it matter!? We're the only ones that can move right now. If we're going to save that old lady or protect the immigrant residential city, we have to act now!!"

"Wait. Sorry, but I was kind of hoping you would take this more in the direction of 'Froleytia ordered us to wait here, so we have no choice but to give up this time'! Ah, what!? Hey, stop that! What are you doing!?"

"Just listen, Heivia," said Quenser as he grabbed at the collar of the idiot who always seemed to chicken out when it mattered. " The 24th is approaching the immigrant residential city as we speak . Nothing says the Objects have to stay with the foot soldiers. If they head out at full speed on a whim, they will be there in no time

at all. …Do you really think we have time to think about this? We need to act now. And you are the only one who can drive."

"Don't be stupid! Don't get caught up in the situation!! You don 't seem to get this, so let me explain it to you. Seven Objects. The enemy has seven Objects!! How are we supposed to stand up to that with just the two of us!? We wouldn't be able to do anything even if it was just one of them!!"

Heivia shook Quenser's hand off of his collar and shook his head. He seemed to be letting out the trembling that he had been forcing down until then and his expression looked like that of a frightened child.

"What is our purpose in this war!? I'm working to gain the honor I need to inherit my noble family and you are working to become an Object designer as quickly as possible, right!? We're not running around out here with rifles just to get killed!! We don't need to do this! We've done plenty already!! Why are we the ones that have to head down into hell every single goddamn time!?"

That was the overwhelming fear people had of Objects.

That unreasonable situation held the underlying assumption that it could never be overturned.

What Heivia was saying was perfectly natural for anyone of that day and age. It was the people who felt nothing when suggesting they stand before those monstrous weapons that had something wrong with them.

Quenser understood that.

However…

"Calm down and think, Heivia."

"How the hell am I supposed to do that!? Do you have any idea what you're saying!?"

"Heivia, do you really think they have 7 Objects!?" shouted Quenser.

Hearing that, Heivia suddenly stopped speaking. It was not that his emotions had cooled down. He was simply so confused he could not figure out what to say.

"How many people does it take to keep the Baby Magnum running? It takes an entire battalion. That's 800 people. You need 800 people for a single Object. If they are using 7 of them, how many people, how much equipment, and how much money would they need? And how much time do you think it takes to raise a single Elite? There is no way they have been spending that much money this whole time!!"

"Then what are you suggesting!?"

"The Oceanian military nation!!"

Quenser suddenly spoke an unrelated term.

But it was not actually unrelated.

He continued, “They used gas tanks to look like nonexistent Objects!! Operations that attempt to throw the enemy into disarray with misleading appearances are hardly rare!!”

“That can’t be… They shot off the princess’s armor.”

“I didn’t say it was gas tanks this time.” Quenser shook his head. “But I doubt these are cutting edge Objects as that would require too great a constant expenditure. They are likely a budget model. Something lower than a Generation 0.5. The armor does not have proper craftsmanship, so it is much thinner and more brittle than a normal Object’s. Who knows if any of the non-main cannons are functional. They prepared a number of low-cost dummies to confuse the princess!!”

“We can’t know that!! What you’re saying makes sense. It isn’t normal for seven Objects to suddenly appear. But we have no proof! This is just speculation!! If they turn out to really be cutting edge Objects, our odds of survival are 0%! This is too much of a risk to base off of conjecture and speculation!!”

“Then I’ll prove it.”

“Hey, wait. Where are you going!! Hey!!”

Quenser headed for the coast while avoiding the areas heated by the low-stability plasma cannons. On the beach were the abandoned floats used by the six Objects that had come from the sea. As a designer, he was a bit interested in the device that allowed it to be easily attached or removed, but that was not the time to be caught up in that kind of thing.

"…Their basic form is that of an isosceles triangle. The sides are 50 meters and 20 meters. They're 3 meters tall. The thickness is probably…and the material used is…"

"What is it? What are you checking on, Quenser?"

"I think the area inside the armor is filled with a gas lighter than air. By using something like AB-22 kept in liquid form, it could gain the buoyancy it needs by vaporizing the amount needed. But that doesn't make sense."

"?"

"It's an issue of volume. Floats this size cannot allow a 200,000 ton mass to float even if filled with AB-22. 50,000 tons would be its limit. Do you understand what I'm getting at here?"

"So…"

"These floats can only carry 50,000 tons, so do you think they were attached to 200,000 ton Objects!? If a real Object sank down into the ocean with floats this small, it would never come back up! Their formation is a bluff!! They don't actually have 7 Objects' worth of military power!!" said Quenser as he lightly tapped on the side of the float with the back of his hand. "The armor must be less than a quarter as thick! And if they're going to cut corners there, it won't have the artisan-made high-level heat resistance!! The flexibility of the onion armor must be much lower than normal ! Who knows if the reactor provides a proper output! They may be travelling with the foot soldiers to mask the fact that they can't move any faster than that! If so, the non-main cannons may not be

able to fire properly!! It's possible we can penetrate its armor without using an Object!!"

Heivia remained silent for a bit.

He must have been thinking over what Quenser had said. Some of his thoughts were likely focused on the uglier side of the debate such as 'what do I do to survive this?' and 'what choice do I get the most out of?'

Heivia finally slowly opened his mouth to speak.

"If we ended up blowing up 7 Objects at once, we would get quite a reward, wouldn't we?"

"Yes."

"And I need to do something that leaves quite an impact if I want to hurry up and take over my noble family rather than smoldering out here, don't I?"

"If the alternative is moving from battlefield to battlefield facing Objects, wouldn't your highest odds of surviving in the end lie in finishing things here once and for all?" Quenser shrugged. "And if we don't do anything about City Slicker, he might cross the Atlantic Ocean and arrive at Europe. I doubt the home country would fall, but a conflict that escapes the boundaries of a 'clean war' could create an economic crisis. Commoners would not be the only ones to suffer from that. How would your family fare? Can you be certain it wouldn't decline greatly before you could even inherit it?"

"Damn you," swore Heivia. "Fine. I'll go along with this!! But this is the last time!! This time, I will do enough to become the head of the Winchell family! This is the end! I've had it with war!! I 'm never going to make a gamble with my life again!!"

"We need a vehicle. We should be able to figure out their route using the GPS map."

"Hey, Quenser. The dummies left their floats here, right? So how are they planning to cross the Atlantic?"

"City Slicker supposedly has a weapons factory somewhere around here. There might be another unit waiting to attach the floats on the eastern end of Victoria Island." Quenser lightly tapped on the side of the abandoned float with the back of his hand. "I have no intention of giving them a chance to use anything like that or to attack the immigrant residential city. That's why I need a vehicle, Heivia. We need to head after the Indigo Plasma as quickly as possible."

"Dammit. Where are the drivers? I need the key. Don't tell me the key was melted by those low-stability plasma cannon blasts."

"Can't you just hotwire one like in movies?"

"I could if I wanted to, but it's all over if I mess up. It would be easier to just use the key."

As they spoke, Quenser and Heivia started back in the direction of the hill where the injured soldiers were resting.

Suddenly, gunshots rang out.

Sparks flew from the side of the float just ahead of where they were.

(…Are there still some of the 24th's foot soldiers left!?)

"Get down, Quenser!!"

But before they could search for cover, more bullets were fired accurately at the ground just in front of them. It was an obvious warning. And it did not come from just one direction. They could not escape just by crouching down.

Quenser stubbornly looked around while halfway crouched down to the ground. It was unclear if the key was in it, but there was a 4WD off-road vehicle stopped a bit away.

In the next instant, the off-road vehicle exploded, sending out flames and a shockwave.

Despite how far away he was, Quenser instinctually brought both hands up to protect his face. He belatedly realized a portable antitank missile had been fired at it.

The battle formation was already complete.

Quenser saw no way for them to fight back.

The two boys slowly put their hands up. The ground looked level at first, but it actually had small undulations like the waves on the ocean surface. A group of five foot soldiers were hiding behind those undulations.

"(They have midrange sniper rifles and a portable antitank missile launcher. This is bad, Quenser. If we make any odd moves, we'll be in heaven the next thing we know. We need to get permission before even sneezing to ensure there are no misunderstandings.)"

"(What's with those ridiculous uniforms? And more importantly, the model of gun they're using.)"

"(I know. It makes no sense. Why would the Capitalist Corporations show up here?)"

"Okay, enough whispering, you two," said one of the Capitalist Corporation attackers in an oddly cheerful voice.

She was a girl with blonde hair and brown skin. She appeared to be a bit older than Quenser. Her outfit…was strange. The materials it was made out of were the same as a military uniform. However, its design was similar to that of a maid uniform. She even had cat ears on. Quenser could only think that it was meant to mock the enemy much like the faces painted on the noses of fighter planes.

All 5 enemies were girls of the same age. Paying no heed to Quenser or Heivia, they spoke among themselves.

"Will this be enough of a present?"

"It should be fine. At least I hope it is."

"We're almost out of rations, so we need to get a hit here."

"Yes. At any rate, we need rescue to come for them."

Quenser had a very bad feeling about what was to come, so he spoke with his hands still in the air.

"Hey, what is going on? Who are you people? What are you trying to do?"

"We are a battlefield cleanup service," replied the blonde-haired , brown-skinned girl with a smile. "We are a type of PMC. You know what those are, right? They are mercenary companies. These outfits are…well, they were a request. That is one of the downsides of the service industry. We are out of business cards, so don't ask for one. …However, we are not a big enough PMC to take over the maintenance of an Object. We are basically employees dispatched to help out a little."

"So you're money-obsessed freaks from the Capitalist Corporations…" spat out Heivia, but the brown girl did not seem to mind.

"Really, we ended up in a lot of trouble thanks to your Legitimacy Kingdom military taking control of the Alaska district. The Legitimacy Kingdom and the Information Alliance were supposed to wear each other down enough that we in the

Capitalist Corporations could send in our Object. But instead you easily defeated the Information Alliance and took control of Alaska .”

“You mean when our princess was fighting the Rush’s ‘Oh ho ho’?”

“Hm? You use boring names like that in the Legitimacy Kingdom? …At any rate, the Capitalist Corporations forces here were left in quite the panic. Some communications mistake in the confusion of the large-scale withdrawal operation resulted in the transport plane we were supposed to be on taking off without us. Do you understand? We were left behind!! We had to risk our lives living out here with enemies everywhere and days that never got above freezing. This was no laughing matter. We have no choice but to make our way back to the home country on our own. … Anyway, we were in a bit of trouble because our armored vehicle’s fuel did not seem like it would last until the border. Western America is just too far away.”

Quenser clicked his tongue.

He had heard the stories of soldiers left wandering the Alaska district after a failed withdrawal operation. It seemed those five were some of those.

Heivia spoke while choosing his words carefully.

"…If you would like some hot soup and a blanket, just surrender. You will be temporarily treated as prisoners of war, but a deal can then be made between governments to have you returned to the Capitalist Corporations."

"Doing that would affect people's trust in the company. We decide people's human rights based on the size of their bank account, remember? We wouldn't be able to advertise after that."

"Then what do you plan to do?"

"Deal with that," said the brown girl as she pointed at the distant Baby Magnum. Even if the details were unclear, it was obvious even from that distance that it was damaged and unable to move. "We can probably get the Elite to eject by pretending to be maintenance soldiers, don't you think? We just have to say the reactor has been damaged and is about to go critical. Then we can capture the Elite."

"…Wait."

"We know the current situation in the Alaska district. That is the Legitimacy Kingdom's last Object. The seven owned by the traitors will soon head out into the Atlantic Ocean. What happens then? The Alaska district will be empty. The Capitalist Corporations will be free to return. The sooner that happens, the better for us. Every day and every hour counts. …Our rations are just about gone, and we have no guarantee we can kill a deer or reindeer whenever we need one."

(This is bad.)

They were from the Capitalist Corporations. They did not care in the slightest about the Legitimacy Kingdom's situation.

"…Just to double check, but you said you knew the current situation, right?"

"Yes. It was announced in an unencrypted transmission. But that does not matter. There may be some from the Capitalist Corporations among those immigrants, but they changed nationality of their own will. We have no reason to worry about them. …And most importantly, worrying about them will not make us any money."

That last comment was likely the true reason.

That mercenary logic that took only money and profit into account made Quenser want to struggle. However, he just barely managed to hold himself back.

Instead, he said, "You're mercenaries, right?"

"We are a PMC, so yes. If you have a request, please use the form on our official website. The payment plans are a tad complex, but do not worry. It is programmed to automatically calculate it all out for you."

"We have no time. I will hire you right here. If I do, you'll fight for us, right? That's all we need."

Quenser responded seriously to her joking words.

"Quenser!!" shouted the noble named Heivia in an attempt to stop the other boy, but Quenser paid him no heed. He merely stared the brown girl straight in the eye.

In response the girl sneered at him.

"Ha ha ha!! Are you stupid!? It seems you don't know what prices this kind of thing goes for, boy!! Your allowance is not enough to hire us!!"

As she smiled, the girl grabbed Quenser's collar.

She drew him in close and some anger filled her smile.

"We view wealth and economics as above all else, so we hate it when people make a mockery of money. Our fee is a sincere reward given in exchange for the work we perform. The mere thought that we would lower it in a time of crisis out of a sense of charity or justice is an insult. You are essentially saying the value of our lives can change based on your own convenience."

"I never said that," replied Quenser as he stuck a hand into the pants pocket of his military uniform.

The brown girl overlooked it because she had gotten too close to him. The other mercenaries responded by raising the barrels of their guns, but Quenser ignored them and pulled out the contents of his pocket and threw it at the brown girl's face. It was a small rubber box.

The next thing he knew, he had been punched.

While looking down at Quenser as he lay collapsed on the snow , the brown girl spat out, “It seems you still do not understand where your place is.”

“You’re the one that still does not understand,” replied Quenser with a smile. He pointed at the small rubber box that’s latch had come undone when it had fallen to the ground. “I am an important customer.”

“Wait. This is…”

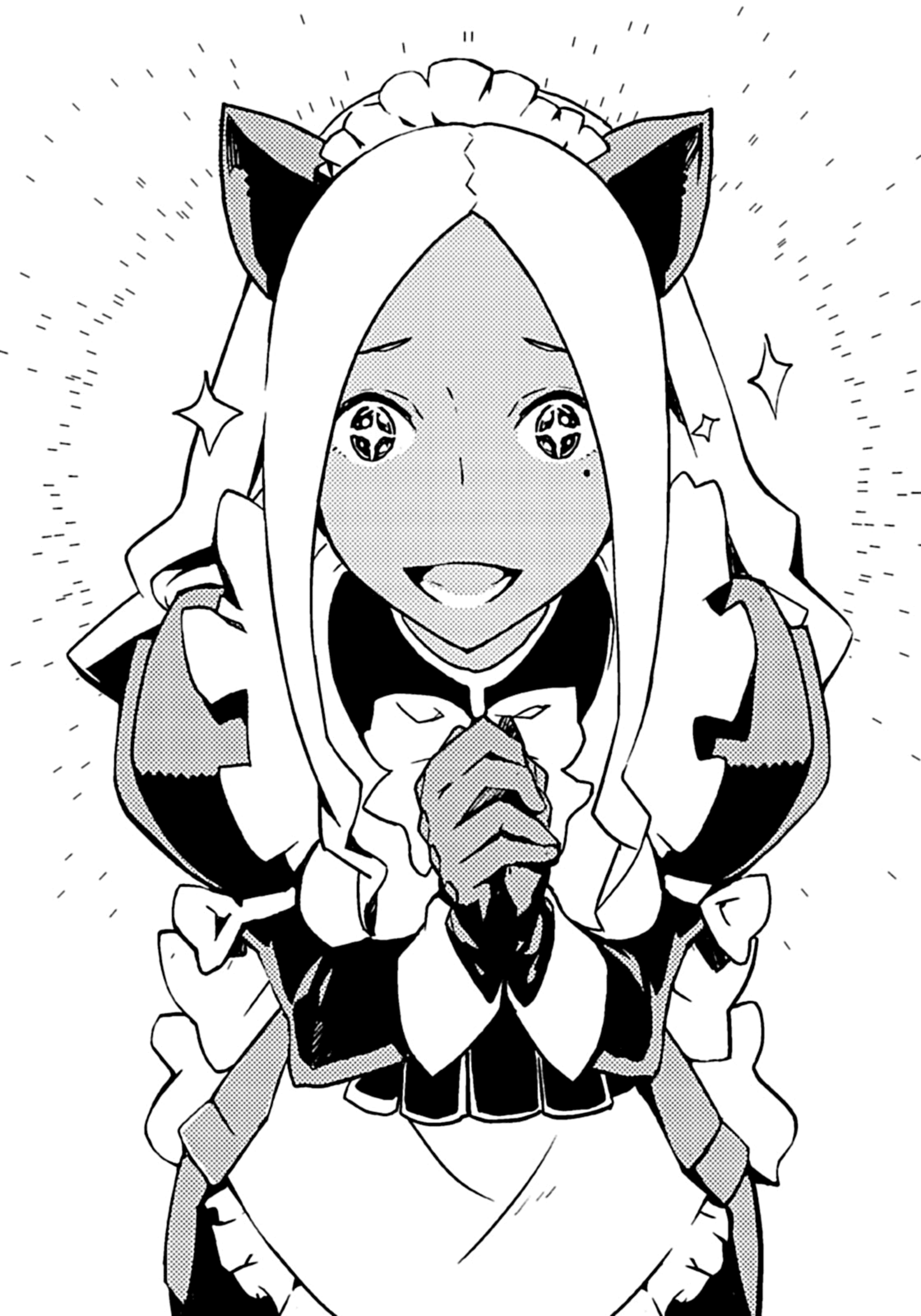
“I would assume someone from the Capitalist Corporations like you would be more knowledgeable about this kind of thing than me. Or do you use too much cash and electronic money, so you know nothing of jewels?” said Quenser to the brown girl who was staring at the clear beads scattered across the snow. “They’re diamonds. They are from a military mine on the Kamchatka Peninsula. The Faith Organization hid the existence of the diamonds while mining them to fund their military.”

“Charm.”

The brown girl called out someone’s name and one of the mercenaries pulled out a special loupe. She picked up the clear beads, rolled them around in her gloved hand, and looked at them through the lens.

"They look real. And it does not seem any fakes are mixed in. I believe there are 15 carats here. Their grade is not bad either. The lack of a certificate is a major point against them, but by laundering them, we could likely get 80% market value on them."

"That's what I'll pay you up front. You could always just shoot us and take them, but there are two more identical rubber boxes hidden below a rock near our maintenance base. If you help us, I will give you the remaining two regardless of the outcome of the operation. …What is the market value of a mercenary? How many years would it take you to make this much? Actually, would you even be able to make this much before you died?"



"…"

The brown girl started trembling.

The trembling was clearly caused by a positive feeling such as joy. It was true that their trustworthiness as mercenaries would lower by helping an enemy nation. However, it would not matter if they received fewer jobs afterwards if they made two or three times the amount they could hope to make in their entire lives otherwise. In the Capitalist Corporations, people's human rights were decided by the size of their bank accounts, so how much money was needed to simply retire and live an enjoyable life?

"You said before that your fee is a sincere reward given in exchange for the work you perform. That is exactly right. And that is why we are prepared to pay this much. What will you do? Will you accept our request?"

After Quenser uttered those final words, the brown girl knelt down, clasped her hands before her face, and gave her response with her eyes sparkling.

"You should have said so sooner, master!!"

Part 8

The small Capitalist Corporations PMC that specialized in battlefield cleanup used a 10-wheeled armored vehicle. It had

quite a bit of space inside, but it could not take sharp turns. The model seemed to prioritize transporting troops more than suppressing an enemy with installed firearms.

Quenser frowned slightly when he entered.

"…It smells like a girl's room."

"Come in, come in!! I apologize that it is so cramped, but we will show you our best hospitality!! Charm! Do we have any tea left!?"

"Nothing that hasn't been used twice already. We do have drinking water made from melted snow and enough rations to make chazuke."

"You're useless. Oh, excuse me. I forgot to mention, but my name is Wydine Uptown! We will do anything from reconnaissance and bombardment support to shoulder massages and ear cleanings!!"

"I-I see. Well, we mostly just need you to get us to the immigrant residential city."

Wydine's excessively wide smile made Quenser draw back a bit . As per his request, Wydine called out to the driver and the vehicle was off. Heivia then cut in from the side with a big grin.

"Hey, Quenser. If they're willing to do anything, we might as well get what we can. I think I'd like an ear cleaning while resting my head on her lap!!"

The smile disappeared from Wydine's face

"I don't want to hear anything from you. Go sit over in the corner."

"…Why are you treating me differently?"

"Because he is a customer who has properly paid us while you are a piece of shit that hasn't given us a single cent You should be grateful we even let you aboard."

"Fine then! I won't expect anything from you!! But know this: I' m the type of guy that gets excited when a girl looks down at him with cold eyes!!" As Heivia started sulking, he suddenly realized something. "Wait, couldn't we have used the Hand Axe rather than the diamonds to make a contract with this PMC? Each gram is supposed to be worth more than a gram of platinum."

"It's the catalyst used in its production that costs so much. The completed explosive isn't worth that much," said Quenser offhandedly before changing his train of thought.

His thoughts turned to the 24th Mobile Maintenance Battalion and its 7 Objects.

"What is it?"

"I know it's a bit late, but I was thinking about the situation here. I may have hired you with those diamonds, but this will likely be a difficult battle." Quenser sighed. "Six of the seven Objects are likely dummies that are lower than a Generation 0.5,

but they can still use their main cannons. And the Indigo Plasma is a real Second Generation Object. That is a true monstrous weapon.”

“Come to think of it,” cut in Heivia as he glanced over at Wydine. “Even if those are budget dummy models, how did they get the Elites to pilot them? Or are they forcing regular soldiers to pilot them?”

“Hmm? Those are probably strategic AIs, not Elites,” said Wydine.

“What?”

Quenser frowned and Wydine called out to one of her fellow mercenaries.

“Lemish, explain it to our customer. Use the screen to make it simpler.”

“Okay.” A pigtailed mercenary girl sat next to Quenser and showed him a handheld device. “These red arrows indicate the actions taken by the six Objects as they came ashore. Can you see the common trait among all of them?”

“They move in unnaturally straight lines… Although, that could just be them staying in formation.”

"And this is their leader, the Lily Maria…or the Indigo Plasma as I believe you call it. Look at the ring around it. Once the six dummy models enter a circle with a radius of 5 kilometers around the leader…"

"Their actions…change!?"

"They switch over to the much more flowing movements of a living being. Likely, they are normally piloted by strategic AIs but the leader can manually control them to make corrections. …If it had not been a surprise attack, the Object on the sea may not have been destroyed so easily."

"So they can switch back and forth between auto and manual. First the Information Alliance and now the Objects of the 24th. Strategic AI development sure has gotten popular of late." Quenser looked over at Heivia. "If the dummies really are using strategic AIs, can we use the Angelina List to stop them like we did with the Information Alliance's Rush?"

"There are too many problems," was Heivia's negative response . "The Rush's Elite was focused solely on the princess. That was why we were able to move freely. But that isn't the case here. If we ran around the area, their main cannons would blow us away. Also, we got lucky with the Object remains scattered about last time."

"The Active Sledge sank into the sea, but what about the Snow Quake?"

"The numbers are just too different," spat out Heivia in annoyance. "The Water Strider had 8 main cannons. I actually used 3 of those. We had three pieces of wreckage for the one Object. The wreckage outnumbered the Objects. …On the other hand, we have just the one piece of wreckage to use against 6 dummies and the Indigo Plasma. Even if we managed to get full usage of the Snow Quake wreckage, their AI would not consider it a threat. They would just surround the wreckage and blow it to pieces to make sure it could no longer function."

"Now, now," cut in Lemish out of nowhere to cut off Quenser and Heivia's negative thoughts.

She then turned the conversation in the direction she wanted it to go.

"What matters is the 5 kilometer range in which the AI can be manually corrected. Most likely, infrared or electromagnetic signals are used for the remote control. And if so…"

"…I get it. That means we might be able to use that to our advantage if we get that close."

"Sir, our PMC has a full assortment, of weapons, ammunition, provisions, communications equipment, and electronic jamming equipment."

Wydine kicked over a large plastic box and a large number of firearms spilled out.

She smiled and said, "If you need anything, just tell us."

"Even if most of them are dummy models, this is still a formation of 7 Objects where one is Generation Two. Also, Prizewell City Slicker is crazy. He will not hold back even if we raise the white flag. Once we head out, we can't give up partway through."

"We will do anything as long as you pay us. And you have already given us plenty."

Part 9

Ayami Cherryblossom, the Object maintenance chief of the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion, stopped her off-road vehicle and jumped out onto the ground.

Ayami was commonly referred to as the old maintenance lady.

She had originally been from the Capitalist Corporations.

The mindset of all value being based on economics and money had deeply dyed her heart and she saw nothing wrong with the preference of human rights being based on the size of people's bank accounts. Even when she had trained in Object maintenance, she had held no pride in the actions themselves. She had held pride in the profit she gained from the actions.

When she had first learned of the actions of her daughter and son-in-law, she had simply thought they were being stupid. Talk of providing agricultural support for areas that did not have enough food may have brought tears to people's eyes, but it had no more value than that. Going through with it was nothing more

than spending actual money on something that would bring no profit. In the Capitalist Corporations, even a young child who had yet to start school would tell you that was a waste of money.

When her daughter and son-in-law's actions had led to them being chased out of the Capitalist Corporations, Ayami had punched her own daughter. But then she had grabbed her hand. She had been unable to abandon them. She had realized that attachment that went beyond economics or money may have been a part of what led that couple to provide that agricultural support.

They could not stay in the Capitalist Corporations. They had to flee to some other land. During that flight, she had become intensely aware of the presence of the giants that were the world powers.

And this went beyond realizing just how great a shadow the Capitalist Corporations cast.

She also realized that the Legitimacy Kingdom they were fleeing to cast just as great of a shadow.

Even once they reached that goal, it would not be a happy life awaiting them.

Whether they turned back or continued on, nothing but hardships awaited them.

But…

The more she was trampled on by those giants, the stronger one feeling grew within her.

She was determined to protect her family from those large shadows no matter what.

And she would even use the military or Objects to do that.

"Shikibu!! Iekazu!! Are you in there!?"

The old lady shouted some names in front of a family apartment building. Even in that peculiar area of the city, that apartment building was different than those around it. It was a pale prefab building just like the others, but it was a proper high rise building. It was fully equipped with elevators and self-locking doors. The walls and floors had the same double-layer insulation usually used in windows. The building was not made of prefab because of a lack of resources. The entire city was made that way out of choice. The nameplates and signs were a mix of hiragana, katakana, kanji, and other scripts, all of which were a strange sight in the Legitimacy Kingdom. It was just the type of thing that would irritate Prizewell City Slicker.

The old lady called the names of her daughter and son-in-law, but received no response. However, she had no time to wait around. She climbed the stairs to the third floor and headed for a specific door.

At the same time, her daughter, Shikibu, opened the front door.

The black-haired woman in her late twenties looked utterly shocked when she saw the old lady.

"What are you doing here, mother? I thought you didn't get time off until-…"

"Is Iekazu here? And what about Orihime, my granddaughter!? "

"Of course not. This is a weekday. Papa is at work and our daughter is at elementary school. Honestly, has the military left you unable to tell what day of the week it is?"

"Contact them," said the old lady, sounding at her wits' end. " Hurry!!"

"What? What? Ehh? If you're coming over to play, you should call ahead, mother."

The old lady forced her way in the front door and picked up the receiver of the landline phone located near the entrance. She called the number she had memorized beforehand, but…

"No good. The phone isn't going through."

For an instant, she thought the 24th had cut the phone lines, but that was not it. Things were getting noisy out front. Objects were over 50 meters tall, so their advance would be visible even from afar.

"The phone lines must be congested…"

"What is going on?" asked Shikibu while blinking. "The TV suddenly switched over to a test broadcast and then the internet wouldn't connect no matter what page I tried to go to. And I needed to check a recipe for lunch."

"The home country must have cut it off to prevent a panic. They 're cutting everything off starting with the thickest lines. Even if it wasn't congested, we probably couldn't use the phone."

"?"

"Shikibu, remain calm and listen to what I have to say."

"You're the one that seems to be panicking."

"Some Objects will be arriving here soon," said the old maintenance lady as slowly as she could manage. "It is a formation made up of the Indigo Plasma and 6 others. The Legitimacy Kingdom military cannot stop them!! We need to get out of here as quickly as possible! Those monstrous national level weapons will soon turn this city into a sea of flames!!"

"Eh? Wait…" Shikibu put on a smile. She had yet to fix her bad habit from the Japanese Islands. "What do you mean Objects will be arriving? I didn't hear anything about a parade."

The old lady ignored her and pulled out her radio.

She set it to a military frequency and simply turned up the volume.

"Hurry up the repairs on the Baby Magnum!! No one expects you to completely fix it! At the very least, we need a single main cannon functioning. The Indigo Plasma's formation is headed toward the immigrant residential city as we speak. If we take too long, we can't catch up!!"

Shikibu's smile remained.

But she started trembling while still smiling.

"Where are Iekazu and Orihime?" asked the old lady with a serious expression. "We need to get them and leave the city before those 7 Objects arrive!! You need to make your preparations. You have 10 minutes!!"

"Wait. What is going on!? What is going on!? What is going on!? "

"Do you really think I have time to explain everything!?"

"We need to tell the neighbors… No, not just them!! We need to tell everyone in the apartments…no, everyone in the city to escape!!"

Shikibu suddenly stopped speaking after that.

The old lady had slapped her.

"We can't. We would never make it in time. Even if they took us seriously, that would just lead to widespread panic and traffic congestion. All forms of transportation would grind to a halt and no one would be able to escape."

"So you're saying we should abandon them!?"

"Curse me all you want." With her daughter glaring at her like that, the old lady took a challenging step forward. "But I will protect my family. I will do anything to do so. If it will make it more difficult for you to escape, I am prepared to leave this entire city to die."

"You can't…"

"Then are you willing to abandon Iekazu and Orihime? If they learn the truth, everyone living around here will fight to take any vehicle they can find. Once that happens, no one will be able to collect those two. Nor would we be able to escape ourselves!! Are you fine with that!? Are you willing to sacrifice your own family to rescue some complete strangers!?"

"…"

"I am not. That is why I went as far as to run away from my unit to come here. What about you? Are you fine with letting Iekazau and Orihime be burnt away to nothing? I know what Objects can do. Believe me when I tell you this: Object bombardments are relentless. They do not even leave a corpse to be buried."

Without speaking a word, Shikibu struck the wall once.

The loud noise silenced the old lady and Shikibu quickly headed further into the room. She was likely headed to pull a suitcase from a closet.

They had no time.

A panic was already beginning within the city.

If they did not act before it had a serious effect on transportation, they would be trapped within the city. If that happened, they would be on the receiving end of a bombardment from 7 Objects.

After about 5 minutes, Shikibu returned to the entranceway.

"I'm ready."

"Let's go."

"I think I am doing something horrible."

"Do not bear that weight. This is my sin. Those 7 Objects should have been stopped by my unit."

They had no time to wait for the elevator. They used the stairs to head quickly down to the first floor where they climbed aboard the military off-road vehicle. The rubber of the tires screeched across the road surface as they took off.

"Who's closer, Iekazu or Orihime?"

"Papa would be closer. But it isn't that different. They're both within 5 kilometers of here."

"Then we'll start with Iekazu. Tell me how to get to his company."

She drove the off road vehicle while ignoring traffic lights and one-way signs. However, no one seemed to care. They had their own things to worry about. A panic was already beginning. If they had stopped at a red light, people would likely have tried to jump in through the windows.

"How could this be happening?" muttered Shikibu.

The old lady ignored her and continued pressing down on the accelerator.

Iekazu worked at a mid-size menswear company. The company rented out a portion of a double-layer prefab building.

"How do we call for him?"

"Even if the external lines are down, the internal lines should still work. Where is the company's reception desk?"

"There is a general reception desk on the first floor. Visitors for any of the tenants make a request to the external operator and…"

"Then head there. Make something up about forgetting to give him his bento or whatever. Just get them to let you use the internal phone. Have Iekazu come down to the first floor and then bring him out here."

"What about you, mother?"

"If we both left, the off-road vehicle would be stolen. You go. Or do you have the guts to use this to keep any thieves away?"

As she spoke, the old lady pulled something out from the area next to the gear stick. It was a Legitimacy Kingdom military submachine gun.

Shikibu paled and nodded repeatedly before getting out of the vehicle and running toward the general reception desk on the first floor.

The old lady watched Shikibu through the clear automatic door for a while.

Finally, Shikibu returned with a man wearing a suit. Like a proper employee, he was wearing the menswear made by his own company. The old lady clicked her tongue lightly when she saw the timid-looking man.

"You took too much time."

"I have heard the general situation, but…" started the man.

"We don't have time to discuss this," said the old lady as she slammed down the accelerator, sending the vehicle off once more. "I can think of no reason why it is okay to let Orihime die."

"…"

The spread of confusion in the city accelerated as time passed. The old lady had no idea what they were thinking, but it seemed some idiots had even set fire to some buildings. She could see black smoke in the distance. She doubted there was much worth stealing in Orihime's elementary school, but she still felt an unpleasant pressure in her chest. There was no longer any safe place in the city.

"You're going too fast!! Slow down! You're going to hit someone!!" shouted the man.

"Shut it, you fool!!"

"Waah!! That man is shouting something. Wait, what is that he' s pointing this way? That's a gun!"

The old lady ignored him and pressed down even harder on the accelerator. The needle on the speedometer made a large jump. A few dry gunshots rang out, but the vehicle was not so much as scratched. The man out there had likely not actually been willing to shoot someone.

They arrived at the elementary school.

They drove right in through the front gate, made a sharp turn into the faculty parking lot, and came to a quick stop. It seemed classes had already been called off, but the children were not being let out. They could see a lot of faces peering out through the windows. They were all filled with worry.

Given the confusion in the city, the faculty had made the right decision. But it was not enough. That would not save the children from the seven Objects led by City Slicker.

"Shikibu, Iekazu. Go get Orihime. If the teachers try to get in the way, use this." The old lady held a submachine gun out toward Iekazu. "But don't pull the cocking lever. I've emptied the chamber. As long as you don't do that, there is no way for it to fire. "

"Please, no. This has nothing to do with if it can actually fire."

"Hmph. Just hurry it up. Otherwise those 7 Objects will get here first."

"Yes, but…"

Iekazu trailed off as he got out of the off-road vehicle.

"I know," said the old lady, cutting him off.

Iekazu seemed unable to stand the worried gazes of the other children. The old lady felt the same. She would be leaving those children to die in order to allow her family to escape.

"I know!! But there is no perfect choice here!! Hurry up. We need to get Orihime out of here!!" she shouted.

Iekazu frantically ran off toward the door to the school. Shikibu followed him.

Suddenly, the old lady heard an ominous thundercloud-like rumbling in the distance. She grimaced. She recognized the noise. It was static electricity. That was the sound of the massive amounts of artificially produced static electricity that was used to float the giant form of an Object.

It was not coming from the Baby Magnum.

That left only one other option.

(Did we not make it in time…!?)

If she could hear it from where she was, the 7 Objects must have already arrived at the outskirts of the city. They could fire at any moment. The great slaughter in the name of language preservation activism would begin. Once it started, no one would be able to escape. Buildings would fall, overpasses would crumble, and all forms of transportation would be cut off. The off-road vehicle would be of no use whatsoever.

The old maintenance lady gritted her teeth.

And then…

"Hey, old lady! Are you still alive? The knights in shining armor have arrived!!"

The familiar voices of two boys came in over her radio.

"Hey, Quenser. This really is a horrible part to play!! No matter how you rationalize it, fighting seven Objects just isn't normal!!"

"Shut up, Heivia. This is our big moment. Let's finish this in some flashy way and become the heroes once again."

"You always act like this! The nobles doing nothing but eating snacks back in the safe countries could learn a thing or two from you!!"

"Heivia, you always complain, but you always pull through in the end."

(How can they do this?)

The situation was about as bad as it could get. Fighting even a single Object was considered out of the question, and this time there were seven. So how could they possibly choose to stand up to them? It did not help Quenser's dream of becoming an Object designer in the slightest.

"Old lady, I can't have you dying," said Quenser. "There's still so much I need to steal from you with my eyes. Losing such an excellent technician would get in the way of my dream. Not to mention…"

"…"

"Our princess is in a bad mood. She says she can't get motivated if you aren't doing her maintenance. If the Baby Magnum can't fight, we're done for. That's why we need your help."

"You…" muttered the old woman.

When she had seen the destroyed unit, the old lady had abandoned them all. She had violated military regulations to protect her family. But they were different. Froleytia's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion was still functioning.

They had not given up.

They were still working to save everyone in the city.

"We are about to engage the 24th Mobile Maintenance Battalion . Our objective is to defend the immigrant residential city! And it isn't just us. The Baby Magnum will be running before long. So don't you dare die until we blow away that bastard Prizewell City Slicker."

The battle was about to begin.

A battle between seven cutting edge Objects and some puny flesh-and-blood soldiers.

Part 10

"Oh, how passionate."

It was obvious it was an act, but the brown mercenary named Wydine rubbed at her eyes as the armored vehicle came to a sudden stop.

"Your hot-bloodedness has moved me."

"I'm sure that's just part of the service you provide, but it kind of annoys me," replied Quenser as he leapt out onto the snowy plain from the rear hatch of the armored vehicle. "What do we do?"

"First, we must bring them to a stop. We will draw their attention so the Objects aim their cannons this way. At the very least, we need to make sure the battle occurs outside the city."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait!!" frantically cut in Heivia. "Are you stupid!? What do you mean draw their attention!? Are you going to shoot them with a portable antitank missile!? Once they know where we are, they'll turn us all to ash in a single shot!!"

"Shut up, you mooching bastard. I never said we would be firing it. We can manage by using a Bird or Animal."

"What are those?" asked Quenser and Wydine's face lit up.

"The specialty unmanned vehicles of our battlefield cleanup service!! Bird is an aerial vehicle and Animal is a 6-wheel ground vehicle. They are primarily used as radio-controlled reconnaissance devices, but they can be equipped with a

single-shot rocket launcher. Think of them as mobile mortars. The shock caused by firing the rocket does sometimes destroy the machine, though."

The mercenaries named Charm and Lemish pulled two small units out from the back of the armored vehicle. One was an aerial vehicle with wings about 50 cm long and the other was a flat ground vehicle about 40 cm long. The ground vehicle must have had a few optional parts because it had something like a sled forcibly attached to the bottom.

"How many do you have in total?"

"One Bird and 10 Animals. The radio signal can be used to determine our location, so we also need to set up a few dummy antennae. That way, we will not be blown away when we perform a surprise attack."

"Then let's get started." Quenser approached the unmanned vehicles lined up on the snow. "What can we do to help?"

"They use a Capitalist Corporations format, so we will take care of setting them up. Could you perhaps set up the dummy antennae? It would help a lot if you set them up at random locations within a radius of 500 meters of here."

Wydine gave a look to Lemish and the other mercenary girl brought out a few cases. They were something like attaché cases 30cm by 30 cm and 5 cm thick.

"You do not need to open the cases. When you place them, make sure this gray side is facing down. If you then use your thumb to flip the switch near the handle, you are done. The frequency is already set, so you do not need to do anything else."

"Heivia, let's get to it."

"Fine, fine. But do you think you could pay me with some jewels, too?"

"When will we begin? If we don't hurry, the Indigo Plasma will start attacking the city."

"Setting up the antennae will take 5 minutes. It will take another 5 minutes for Bird to make it in range. The Animals will be travelling along the snow, so it will take even longer for them. They will be used to deal with the foot soldiers after they have noticed us."

"So 10 minutes at the soonest." Quenser divided up the dummy antenna cases between Heivia and himself. "This is cutting it close. "

"Yes, but we must do it."

"Exactly right. Let's go, Heivia. I'll head to the east and you head to the southwest."

"God dammit. I've really had enough of making full speed dashes through the snow."

Quenser and Heivia then ran off in different directions. Even then, the seven Objects accompanying the foot solider unit were approaching the immigrant residential city. They had no time.

Quenser had three dummy antennae. It would be meaningless to put them all in almost the same place. But simply spreading them out in a circle around their actual location would tell the enemy where they were at first glance. What was important was to set them in random locations to make it impossible to tell which was the real one.

(Shit. Are we going to make it in time!?)

The thick snow slowed Quenser down more than he had expected and it wore down his stamina. He flipped the switch near the case's handle and set the dummy antenna by practically throwing it.

(This isn't going to cut it. At this rate, the Indigo Plasma will fire on the city before the Bird can fire its rocket! We don't have time to keep this completely safe!!)

As Quenser ran toward the location to put the next dummy antenna, he pulled out his radio and contacted Wydine.

"Don't wait. Send out the Bird now!!"

"Eh!? We can't. They will detect our location from the radio signal. They will aim for the dummy antennae first, but if you are not yet far enough away from them…"

"It doesn't matter!! If they start the bombardment while we wait , this is all for naught!! Hurry!!"

"Don't blame me if something happens to you!! I doubt your life insurance company would be happy about this!!"

"Hey, Quenser! Don't tell me you're forgetting that this puts me in the same danger!!" added Heivia.

Quenser flipped the switch of the second dummy antenna and threw it. He looked into the distance and saw Lemish aim a bow gun-like launching device diagonally up and pull the trigger. The Bird shot smoothly up, propellers meant for models began to spin, and it flew along at only 15 meters up. After its altitude stabilized, it headed straight for the Indigo Plasma.

"What is its top speed?" asked Quenser.

"170 kph. Once it gets up to speed and stabilizes, it will be there in no time. There is a danger of a powerful crosswind causing it to lose speed, though," said Wydine. "You two need to quickly get away from the dummy antennae!! Once the rocket is fired, the Objects will counterattack!!"

When he heard that, Quenser flipped the switch on the third and final dummy antenna and threw it to the side. It seemed less like he was placing it in an optimal place and more like he was throwing away an obtrusive weight.

He heard a sound like a champagne cork being removed.

It was the sound of the explosive being fired from the rocket launcher attached to the bottom of the Bird. However, the 40 millimeter shell never struck the Object's armor. Before it could, the Indigo Plasma fired a small laser. With an orange beam of light , the rocket exploded in midair. The vehicles of the infantry unit accompanying the Objects suddenly braked, but the entire unit did not come to a stop. There had been no actual damage done.

And…

No matter how small it was, an Object would naturally react to anything that tried to attack it. With the slight damage from the previous battle still intact, the Indigo Plasma immediately turned around.

Several of its cannons moved slightly. It was clearly searching the area. In the meantime, Quenser continued to run. The thick snow slowed him down and he almost tripped several times, but he continued running as quickly as he could away from the dummy antennae.

And then the Indigo Plasma fired.

With a deep noise as if from a large drum, a giant shell flew at over the speed of sound, scattering shockwaves as it went.

"Was that a railgun!?"

He had heard the sound first because of the trajectory of the shell. It was not aimed at the ground. It was aimed up in a large arc similar to a long throw in baseball. It flew about 100 meters above Quenser's head.

The railgun shell suddenly stopped.

A parachute had opened.

Wydine must have been using binoculars or a scope to check on it from afar because her voice came in over the radio.

"I'm checking on the shell!! It is something like a cylindrical metal drum!! Its diameter is 70 cm and its length is 150 cm!! There appear to be countless holes along the sides!!"

"What is it…?"

As Quenser ran, he heard a sound like steam being sprayed out from somewhere. It was coming from the metal drum hanging down from the parachute. The air distorted like sugar water being mixed.

"A gas…Is that the gas for the low-stability plasma cannon!?"

After their fight with the 24th's foot soldiers, Quenser and Heivia knew what that special gas could do. It was heavier than air . When disseminated up in the air like that, gravity and wind would spread it over a large area.

Yes.

That would create a field that could be turned into a hell of light and heat from a single shot of a low-stability plasma cannon.

The main cannons of the six dummy models creaked as they aimed in that direction.

"Quenser!! They're clearly aiming for the dummy antennae in your direction!! You need to find a hill or whatever kind of cover you can find and get down!!"

(I can't escape gas pouring down from above by doing that!!)

The area covered by the special gas had exceeded 100 meters. It would be difficult to get out of the range with all the thick snow around. Quenser pulled a Hand Axe plastic explosive out of his bag. He stabbed in the electric fuse and threw it as far above his head as he could manage.

When it reached its highest point, Quenser hit the button on his radio.

With an explosive noise, a shockwave spread out above his head.

The shockwave blasted the gas away from the area.

In the next instant, the 6 dummy models fired their low-stability plasma cannons. They fired them at the point 50 meters up where the special gas was the most concentrated.

A flash of light burned into Quenser's eyes and a great noise stabbed into his brain.

He was slammed down to the ground like he was being crushed from above. Despite wearing a thick coat for the cold climate, he could feel a stinging pain on his skin. That pain told him that he was lightly burned. Despite being burned, he never did feel the normal sensation of heat.

"

Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
!?"

His vision was partially impaired so that it looked like a white film had been placed over his eyes. Quenser writhed around on the ground as pain assaulted him from all over. He felt like he was lying in a giant mud puddle. The snow around the area had been completely transformed into lukewarm water.

But it could have been much worse.

If he had not used that bomb to blow away most of the special gas from the area, that "misfire" would not have occurred. The surface of the ground would have turned to glass and Quenser himself may have been turned to ash.

And all of that was just from the first shot.

Naturally, the enemy would not stop there.

"Quenser!! Get out of there! That Hand Axe told them where you are!!" shouted Heivia over the radio.

Quenser got up from the unpleasant mud and rolled down the slope of one of the nearby rolling hills.

He just barely made it in time.

A large number of dry, firecracker-like noises filled the battlefield.

It was not coming from the Objects.

The 24th's foot soldiers had gotten down from their military trucks and had begun to fire their assault rifles. 5.56mm pointed rifle bullets scattered from 70-80 rifle barrels which shot dirt into the air from the hill Quenser was using as a shield.

A second round did not immediately come from the Objects because the scale of their attack was so large they must have decided it was too much of a pain to aim at such a small target.

Or perhaps…

(With 7 Objects, they have a total of over 700 cannons. If they fired with all of them, it would be over for me. That must mean the dummy models' reactors are not perfect. They can only just barely fire their main cannons, so the secondary weapons are just decorations.)

The foot soldiers continued to fire so Quenser could not move from where he was. At that rate, the Objects would fire and it would all be over. But he simply could not carelessly poke his head out amid that shower of bullets.

Suddenly, the Indigo Plasma moved.

"Dammit! It's that railgun again!!"

As Quenser watched, the drum-like shell arced up into the air. The foot soldiers had only been meant to keep him in place. They were working together, but it was clear who was in charge. Even while piloting the Indigo Plasma, Prizewell's personality could be seen.

However, the metal drum fired by the railgun never reached its place far above Quenser's head.

Before it could, a portable anti-tank missile was fired from the ground. The missile was shot by a laser before it could reach the railgun shell, but the effects of the blast could not be ignored. The metal drum's trajectory sharply changed angle and its parachute did not open. It landed halfway between the foot soldiers and Quenser.

"Sir! We cannot have you dying before you pay us the rest of our fee!!"

"Thanks, Wydine. I respect that honest-to-a-fault way of living."

The fallen metal drum would likely disseminate the special gas from its place on the ground, but its effective range would be much smaller than from in the air. Also, it was downwind of Quenser.

But…

"Hey, Quenser!! The Indigo Plasma's main cannon is moving!!"

"You're kidding…!"

The low-stability plasma cannon fired the instant after Quenser shouted that.

It caused a white explosion.

Quenser's body was blown directly backwards. He flew several meters through the air before hitting the ground. He felt a pain like his internal organs were being squeezed. The flash of light was so bright he was amazed he did not go blind.

"…That bastard," said Quenser as he lay on his back. "He didn't even hesitate to blow up his own subordinates, did he!?"

Quenser did not have the heart to see what things were like on the other side of the hill. That had been an overwhelming low-stability plasma explosion, a blast that created enough heat and force to shoot through an Object's armor when concentrated. The destruction had to go beyond what the word "catastrophe" could express.

"He's insane. Why would the 24th follow a despot like him!?"

"Because they have no other choice now. If they surrendered, they would still be charged with the crime of treason. Whatever happens now, their only path to victory is to prevent the 24th from losing no matter what."

"Here they come. It's all 7 Objects this time!! That bastard is planning to crush the corpses of his comrades as he advances!!"

Hearing Heivia's cry, Quenser slowly stood up. He could not stop where he was. The seven Objects had to know where he was.

"The enemy is sending the six dummy models along in a horizontal line with the Lily Maria following behind!!"

"That bastard doesn't hesitate to treat his subordinates as expendable, but he's damn careful when it comes to his own life!! This pretty much confirms that the dummy models are running on a strategic AI!!"

In Quenser's estimation, the dummy models' reactors had a low output so all weapons but the main cannon were mere decorations. That was most likely correct. And those main cannons were not suited for targeting a puny flesh-and-blood soldier.

Which meant…

"Oh, shit. He's heading forward to crush me!!"

"Those monstrous weapons keep their 200,000 ton weight afloat using static electricity. The massive amount of electricity creates a

tremendous force!! And a portion of the propulsion device is supposed to use plasma!!"

With the Objects lined up horizontally, Quenser was reminded of a giant piece of agricultural equipment leveling the ground. It was like a tractor that was 300 meters wide. There was no way he could escape by running to the left or right.

And then a rocket was fired from the ground.

The explosive was fired from so close that the dummy model had no time to react. The dummy model closest to Quenser was targeted. The fact that the explosive directly hit the spherical main body could only mean that the non-main cannons truly were not functioning. Thin pieces of the armor peeled off and stabbed into the ground.

The dummy model that had been attacked stopped moving and its main cannon started to aim. In the next instant, the area the rocket had been fired from turned pure white. The low-stability plasma cannon had been fired.

"You've gotta be kidding me!"

"That was an Animal! Do not worry!!"

Immediately afterwards, five dummy models and the Indigo Plasma passed by Quenser. Due to the hole opened by the one that had stopped to shoot the Animal, Quenser's body was not blown to pieces by a massive amount of static electricity.

"I guess the strategic AI really is just a massive collection of prioritizing routines."

The Indigo Plasma was directly controlled by Prizewell, so he should have been able to manually change course to kill Quenser.

He was either playing around or he was testing the AI.

"There is a cave 20 meters to your WSW! Run to there for now!! If they cannot use anything but their main cannons, it is possible the strategic AI will be unable to deal with the situation!!"

"Okay! I'll just pray I'm not blown to pieces by some misbehaving cannon!!"

At the same time, Quenser spotted a torn metal plate lying on the ground. It was a fragment of armor torn off of the dummy model when it had been hit by the rocket. It was about 30 cm square and 12 cm thick. It was heavy, but not so heavy that he could not pick it up with both hands.

(This is surprisingly light. This isn't just not up to the standards of an Object. Even regular steel would be denser than this.)

He looked closer and noticed that the actual steel plate was only about 5 cm thick. The rest was made up of some pale gray substance. The edge where it had broken off looked more like crumbled stone than metal.

Normally, someone like Quenser who did not weight train would have been unable to pick something like that up. Normally,

a rocket would have been unable to destroy a metal plate that thick . And yet Quenser was holding the fragment.

There could be some secret hidden there.

“Quenser, hurry!! The dummy models are regrouping!! They’re headed your way again!!”

“Understood. And don’t think you’re safe either!! Don’t do anything that will let them know where you are!!”

Urged on by Heivia, Quenser started running while carrying the fragment. The thick snow, the damage he had taken, and the fragment of armor all lowered his speed. A dull pain ran through his elbow. Again and again, he heard whisperings in his heart telling him to throw away that piece of junk.

But he ignored it and continued moving his legs.

He heard a sound like approaching thunderclouds. Quenser’s heart wanted him to move faster than his physical body could manage. This created a gap between his ideal and reality. Where he wanted his legs to be and where they actually were grew confused in his head and he almost tripped. He was just about at his limit. He could not continue on much further. Some armor fragment of dubious usefulness was not worth dying over. He was just about to let go of it.

But then he finally arrived at the cave entrance.

Despite the hard ground within, Quenser dove inside. He rolled down a gentle slope. He continued rolling for around 20 meters.

He had scrapes all over his body and he had light burns covering his skin. But those things hardly bothered him at the moment.

(Dammit. The Indigo Plasma and the 6 dummy models will be here soon!!)

Quenser pulled some Hand Axe from the bag on his back, stabbed in a fuse, and threw it in the direction he had come. He did not have time to hesitate. He pressed the switch on his radio almost immediately.

An explosive blast roared through the closed space.

"Gah!?"

Quenser was sent rolling around the cave, but that was better than the alternative.

The plastic explosive had lowered a shutter of stone.

He could feel a heavy vibration come from beyond that shutter. The Indigo Plasma had likely fired near the entrance of the cave. If he had not crumbled the bedrock to cut off the path, a great blast of heat would have swept through the cave and roasted Quenser.

(That didn't feel big enough to be a main cannon.)

Quenser analyzed the situation as he felt a chill run down his spine.

He had been fortunate that one of the Indigo Plasma's anti-personnel cannons had been used rather than the main cannons of the other 6 Objects. This was not due to any kind of decency on the enemy's side. Prizewell had likely just decided the main cannons were too difficult to use against a single person. If he had used a main cannon, the inside of the cave would likely have been completely roasted.

Quenser tried to use his radio, but he could not connect. The bedrock was cutting off the signal. He had no choice but to search for a different exit. He could also try to use explosives to blow a hole in the collapsed entrance, but the odds were good the shockwave would injure him in the enclosed cave.

Quenser picked back up the fragment of armor and used the backlight of his radio's LCD screen as a light.

He moved the faint light around to investigate the cave.

The battle was still continuing.

There was plenty he still had to do.

Part 11

The cave appeared to have been slowly carved out by the power of water. A slight trickle of water ran down a slope at Quenser's feet. He could keep his feet perfectly dry by walking by the wall. That was how little water there was.

Quenser had been quite worried at first, but he easily found an exit after travelling about 2 kilometers. The trickle of water met up with a river. By the time Quenser made it to the bank of the river, his arms were beginning to go numb, so he dropped the armor fragment to the ground. It almost fell over onto his feet, so he frantically jumped back. Even if it was strangely light for steel, it was still heavy enough to shatter the rocks on the river bank.

"…"

There was something about that armor. It was made of a steel plate and that mysterious gray material, and it was clearly different from normal Object armor.

However, Quenser was only a battlefield student. He did not know how to properly examine the armor plate under normal circumstances and here he had to make do with the equipment he had on him.

He could not manage it on his own.

After thinking for a bit, Quenser changed the frequency on his radio. He was not contacting Heivia or Wydine.

The person he needed to speak with was…

"Old lady!! Can you hear me? It's Quenser! I need your help!!"

"Boy…?"

He received a reply.

That must have meant the Indigo Plasma and the dummy models had yet to attack the immigrant residential city.

"I think I may have a clue to new information related to the Indigo Plasma! But it's too much for a student like me!! I need the help of a pro like you!!"

"You idiot. Don't say any more! I am not with the military right now. If you tell me the situation on the battlefield, you could be charged with a crime as well!!"

"Then we can spend time in the detention barracks together!! Just help me!! We're the only ones who can protect the city!!"

Protect the city.

Quenser heard the old lady's breath catch in her throat when he said that.

"Six of the seven Objects are dummy models. I have a fragment of armor that was blown off of one of those dummies. It has two layers: steel and…some kind of gray material. At any rate, it's unusually light. And not just lighter than proper Object armor, it's lighter than normal steel. I think they have done something to cut down on costs. Please tell me how to examine what kind of material this is!!"

"Wait, let's go through this in order. Dummy models? Material examination?"

"This might be necessary to turn the situation around!! So hurry !!"

"…"

The old maintenance lady fell silent for a moment, but she then started giving Quenser instructions. First she asked Quenser what equipment he had to see what was available to perform the material examination.

"Okay, you have your handheld device and radio, right? Then you can use the electromagnetic method. First, dig a hole underneath the armor plate fragment. Just something like digging a small tunnel in a sandbox. After that, open up your handheld device's wireless LAN and place it underneath the fragment from the side."

Quenser was on the rocky bank of a river, so he stuck the handheld device in the gap between two large rocks underneath the fragment.

"Done."

"Next, set the frequency on your radio. Set it to the same frequency the wireless LAN uses. Then place the radio on top of the fragment and send some arbitrary signal for 10 seconds."

Quenser could hear a distant rumbling. Heivia and the others were still in a desperate situation. Quenser felt the desire to rush things, but he kept telling himself that carrying this task out accurately would lead to the quickest path to the solution.

"Done. What next!?"

"Pull out the handheld device, call up the system screen, and check the signal reception. That should give you a broad percentage."

"Percentage?"

"Just get to it!! I thought you were in a hurry!!"

Quenser frantically looked down at the screen and read the number displayed there.

"It says 34.2!!"

"Hm. With the proper heat resistance, that much of the signal would never have gotten through. That is an inferior product that lacks proper craftsmanship," calmly analyzed the old lady over the radio. "But with the two different layers, it is hard to say anything for sure. Boy, can you tear apart the two materials?"

"It may be a dummy model, but it's still Object armor."

"Then all I can give you is speculation that may be horribly inaccurate." The old lady gave a slow sigh. "The gray material is likely ceramic. The spherical main body is formed from ceramic and then thin metal plates are used to make it look 'Object-like'."

Ceramics had both strength and a certain amount of flexibility. They may have been trying to use that to provide the same ability to absorb and distribute impacts that onion armor provided.

However…

"If that was all it took to reproduce Object armor, things would be a lot easier for us. The dummy models are nothing but inferior models that could be destroyed by a nuke," said the old lady.

"I analyzed the floats they used and I estimate the 6 dummy models each weigh less than 50,000 tons. …From the weight of this armor fragment and the ratio of steel to ceramic, the dummy models' armor is likely a third the thickness of normal Object armor. And it is not steel with the proper heat resistant reactive materials. If they are made out of nothing but cheap ceramics, then their actual strength would be…"

"They got us," groaned the old lady. "We were tricked by the initial impact of their appearance. If she had calmly responded and dealt with one at a time, our princess's main cannons could have stabbed straight through them. Their victory came from the idea of seven Objects causing us to completely lose our cool." The old lady paused for a second. "Do you understand what this means, boy?"

"Eh? That the armor is a lot thinner than normal Object armor, right?"

"Not just that."

Some static then entered the transmission.

It did not sound like naturally occurring interference. The static grew louder and louder.

"It is an issue…of heat resistance. …Their main cannons…are low-stability plasma cannons. And…this is…the Arctic…Alaska…district… They…are acting…like the…ulti…mate…weapons…but …they came here…with their…greatest…weak…ness already…"

"Old lady? Old lady!? Wait…damn!!"

The static grew louder and Quenser could no longer hear her voice. It was hurting his ears, so Quenser pulled the radio away from his face.

"Did they start jamming radio signals to stop the rockets from unmanned vehicles? I thought the Indigo Plasma manually corrected the dummy models using a radio signal!!"

Quenser headed away from the river bank and into the snowy plain once more. As he approached the battlefield, he operated his radio. This time he tried to contact Heivia and the others. But first he set the output to maximum.

"Heivia, Wydine!! Can you hear me!?"

"Ksshhh…I would really prefer not to respond!! Those monstrous weapons are…searching for us by using microphones and…tracking radio signals!!"

"Sir!! Thank goodness you…are okay! That means we will…get the rest of our fee!!"

Despite the static, the transmissions were still making it through . The immigrant residential city was much farther away. That may have been why he had been unable to contact the old lady there.

(Heat resistance. Low-stability plasma cannons. The Arctic Alaska district. Ceramic armor plates that use no high heat resistant reactive materials and do not properly function as onion armor. Where did the dummy models come from? What route did they make their surprise attack from?)

"Wydine, how many of the unmanned vehicles are left!?"

"The Bird was…shot down. I can…still detect…three Animals. But the Objects…have begun…wide range jamming. The radio…signal is…receiving a lot of…interference!!"

"I need you to find a way to carry out another rocket attack. I'll send you the location using my handheld device. Tell me your address!!"

"Wow. A chance to get…personal information from…such an excellent customer!! Today is…my lucky day!!"

"I'll be encrypting it when I send it of course."

Using the address he was given, Quenser sent map data with a mark on it to Wydine.

"This is…?"

"If you do as I say, they will get caught up in it. This plan only works because the small unmanned vehicles don't show up on the anti-personnel sensors. Do you think you can manage it?"

"A half-destroyed…Animal is…right nearby. They think…they have destroyed it…so I can target…whatever I want. I will have to …send out quite…a powerful signal…to force through…the jamming…so there is more of a…risk…of them determining…our location."

"Please do this. Also, the Indigo Plasma's jamming probably has a hole. That way the frequency used to manually correct the dummy models is not interfered with. Analyze the jamming signal and find that hole. That will be the line that connects the leader with the dummies. If we use it well, we might be able to cause some interference of our own."

"Ksshh…As you wish…sir …C'mon get to work, you moocher!! "

"Quenser, once this…battle is over…I have some choice words for you."

About 2 kilometers away, the 7 Objects were moving. The Animal was located right in the middle of the group of Objects. Heivia and the others seemed to be hiding about a kilometer to the

west of the center. If they were found, it would all be over, but they still had a chance. The 24th's strategic AI that was controlling the dummy models was not that advanced.

"So basically the plan is to…ksshh…provoke them to accidentally fire their…low-stability plasma cannons into the center of their formation. That way, the ones with…thin armor will be blown away," said Wydine.

"But the Indigo Plasma is a Second Generation…Object. Ksshhh …Just having it left is enough of a threat," warned Heivia.

"We'll manage somehow. Just do as I tell you for now. If they change their formation, this will all be for naught!!"

Quenser urged them on while checking the situation on his handheld device's GPS map.

At that moment, one of the dummy models suddenly changed direction. It was aiming its main cannon at the hill Heivia and the others were hiding behind.

(Not good. They were located from the upped output on the radio signal!!)

But the dummy model stopped moving. Intense static came from the radio and the GPS map stopped updating.

(Did they find the hole in the jamming signal and blocked the line connecting the Indigo Plasma to the dummies!?)

An explosive noise rang out.

However, it did not come from the Objects. It was much too small for that. The Animal at the center of the 6 dummy models had fired its rocket. The rocket had struck the armor of one of the dummies and exploded.

The strategic AI immediately reacted.

The program made a decision from its list of priorities and began a counterattack against what had attacked it.

Yes.

It used its one functioning weapon, the low-stability plasma cannon it used as a main cannon.

A pure white explosion occurred.

The explosion grew so large it swallowed up the 6 dummy models. Despite his great distance, Quenser was temporarily blinded as if he had looked directly at a magnesium ignition. It was not simply the power of the low-stability plasma cannon fired at the ground near the dummy models. The 24th's foot soldiers had already been roasted, but they had been equipped with gas cylinders and tanks of the special gas in order to work in conjunction with the Objects. Those had caused the explosion to grow even larger.

But…

"Dammit."

The jamming from both sides was gone.

Heivia's curse of despair came through clearly.

The reason for his despair was the seven giant forms he could see.

Their surfaces had melted slightly, but their overall silhouettes were still intact.

The enemy could still move.

"It was no good. It didn't work!! It's not just the Indigo Plasma left! The six dummy models weren't destroyed either! Even if their armor was thinner than normal, they still aren't something flesh-and-blood soldiers can deal with!!"

"No," Quenser said into the radio. "Those 6 were enveloped by the explosion as planned. This is checkmate."

"How is this checkmate!? The surface of the armor was melted a bit, but they can still move!! …C'mon, let's get out of here. What does the reward matter if you die, right!?"

That last bit seemed to have been spoken to Wydine and the others, but the mercenaries did not seem to agree. A PMC focused on profit took that kind of thing seriously.

"They had a major weakness this entire time," said Quenser slowly in an attempt to calm down Heivia who was about to panic. "The armor has no high heat resistant reactive material in it. Nor does it function as onion armor. It's just a mass of cheap ceramic.

In other words, it has a poor resistance to extreme changes in temperature."

"What are you talking about!?"

"Their main cannons are low-stability plasma cannons. Those create a lot of heat. And this is the Alaska district. Being below the freezing point is normal here. And to top it all off, the dummy models made their surprise attack from the bottom of the Arctic Ocean. They would have been completely cooled down. The heat caused by their low-stability plasma cannons would have sent their temperature skyrocketing. And that means…"

Quenser stopped and took a deep breath.

He then began speaking again.

"The properties of the ceramic would have changed greatly! Once that distortion grows large enough, they should collapse under their own weight!!"

A loud noise like a metal joint coming out of place could be heard.

Cracks started running through the 6 dummy models like a glass sculpture that had been dropped on the floor. They shattered in in a way that ignored how the original pieces were joined together.

Quenser glanced down at his handheld device

He could hear his fellow soldiers speaking.

"I have heard that when forged blades are made, the heating of a furnace and the cooling of water are used to alter the properties of the metal in order to make it stronger. The most famous example is the katana from the Japanese Islands," said Wydine in admiration. "But it has the exact opposite effect when not carried out by a skilled craftsman. I believe just opening and closing the door to the workshop can create enough of a temperature difference to cause the metal to be too brittle, making the sword a failure."

"Normally, an Object designed to operate in these conditions would have heating elements in between the armor plates to ensure it does not cool down too much, but I doubt they went that far after cutting so many corners on the armor's thickness."

"Sorry to interrupt your celebration," cut in Heivia. "But the Indigo Plasma is still doing just fine!! That thing is a legit Second Generation Object that cost 5 billion dollars! It isn't going to shatter from that!!"

Quenser could hear an ominous creaking.

Two kilometers away, the slightly damaged Indigo Plasma was moving its main cannon. Even if they had been dummies, it had lost a large portion of its military power with the loss of those 6 Objects. Its Elite, Prizewell City Slicker, must have been quite angry.

As if to display that emotion, the low-stability plasma cannon aimed at a puny flesh-and-blood soldier.

Yes, it aimed at Quenser.

(I guess he finally managed to track me from my radio signal.)

"Heivia. Wydine, and the rest of your mercenaries, he's done for. Cover your ears and get down on the ground if you don't want to go blind or deaf due to a simple explosive blast."

"Quenser!!"

"Sir!?"

Quenser ignored the shouts trying to stop him. Running would hardly help him at that point.

Quenser then heard what sounded like thunderclouds approaching.

Approaching from behind him.

"I was waiting for you, princess," he muttered.

When he had checked his handheld device after the six dummy models blew up, he had been checking on the location of the Baby Magnum.

He had known the princess would make her move when such a large change occurred to the situation.

"No, Quenser…" said Heivia in dull surprise. "The Indigo Plasma is a true Second Generation Object! Even if the princess had all 7 of her main cannons functioning, she would have trouble destroying that monster!! Right now, she only has one. And it's not at full power either!! Even a direct hit isn't going to stop Indigo Plasma here!!"

And when that first strike did not finish things, they would be blown away by a counterattack.

However, Quenser's expression did not change.

"This is enough."

Quenser held his radio in one hand and used the other to hold his handheld device straight out like a handgun. He was not sure if it would actually aid in targeting any, but he aimed the communications infrared signal coming out the end toward the Indigo Plasma.

It looked like he was stabbing at an enemy with the point of a rapier.

"Get him, princess. Finish off that discriminatory bastard."

Immediately afterwards, the two Objects fired their main cannons at exactly the same moment.

Yes.

They both fired low-stability plasma cannons.

The six dummy models had “shattered” around where the Indigo Plasma was and the special gas for their low-stability plasma cannons had filled the area.

The result was obvious.

The Indigo Plasma was swallowed up by a pure white flash of light.

Even if they had been dummies, their main cannons had still functioned. Enough special gas to power six main cannons had surrounded the Indigo Plasma. In response to the Indigo Plasma firing its own main cannon, the special gas had immediately exploded. The explosion may not have had the directionality provided by a cannon, but the scope of the explosion was simply too great. Even without the temperature being intentionally regulated to the optimal point, natural fluctuations and diffusion caused enough of it to be at the proper concentration to be ignited.

The armor could not withstand the tremendous blast.

Object armor was said to be able to withstand a nuclear weapon or two, but it melted like a sugar sculpture here. And once it had grown soft, the princess’s low-stability plasma cannon blast stabbed into it. This caused critical damage to the reactor that produced such tremendous amounts of electricity, which led to an even larger explosion.

“…!!”

Quenser was quite distant from it all, but his vision and hearing were not working properly.

However, he realized soon thereafter that it could have been worse.

At some point, a giant wall had interposed itself between Quenser and the explosion. That wall was an Object. The battered Baby Magnum had acted as a shield for him.

"Hello, are you still alive?" asked the princess.

"I feel like I'm about to die…"

"How about you worry about us!?" shouted Heivia. "We only had half the distance from that explosion than you did!!"

The princess seemed to have decided to simply ignore Heivia's complaints.

"Where is City Slicker?" she asked.

"Dead, I'd think. You saw that explosion. Even if he ejected, he would have been roasted in midair."

"Then we have just one more thing to do."

"Yes," said Quenser into the radio. "We need to tell that old lady everything's okay."

Part 12

Chaos had begun within the immigrant residential city.

It started with the TVs. The normal stations had stopped their broadcasts, but a military antenna on the Baby Magnum was used to force a pirate broadcast through. The wreckage of the seven monstrous weapons was displayed on the screens. After a bit, it switched over to footage of the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion's soldiers letting out a cry of victory. The CS broadcast staff helped film it all.

At first, some people thought it had been faked.

But the Object wreckage could be seen from the edges of the city with binoculars, so fear began to leave the atmosphere of the city. The dark enthusiasm faded away to the point that it was hard to believe how frantic everyone had been just moments before.

"Hey, old lady. Your chauffeured ride is here," said Heivia as he stopped the off-road vehicle within the immigrant residential city. The old lady caught Quenser's eye where he sat in the passenger seat, but the student just shrugged.

The old lady was with her daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter.

She walked away from her family and toward the vehicle.

"I am prepared. What is my punishment?"

"That will be determined later," said Quenser, passing on information from their commander. "As the emergency caused

control of the unit to be lost temporarily, Froleytia has a lot of reports to write, but she told me to pass on a message to you: any failures can be overwritten by results, and you are fortunate enough to have the technical skills needed to make her hesitant to get rid of you."

"…I see," was all the old lady said.

Her heart was likely filled with various emotions she could find no way to express in words.

"Grandma," called out the girl who seemed to be her granddaughter. The girl pointed at something in the distance and asked, "Did you make that, grandma?"

She was pointing at the Baby Magnum as it travelled along outside the city. One of the princess's telephoto lenses must have picked up the girl pointing because one of the main cannons waved back at the girl.

The old maintenance lady remained silent for a bit.

"…Yes," she finally replied. "That is the robot of justice I made and these are my wonderful comrades."

As he lightly stroked the steering wheel, Heivia whispered to Quenser in the passenger seat.

"(Aren't you going to make a joke about that?)"

"(I think we can let this one slide.)"

The old maintenance lady climbed aboard and the off-road vehicle left.

It headed outside the immigrant residential city.

It headed for the maintenance base zone where the princess waited.

Epilogue

With most of its vehicles gone, the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion was forced to temporarily stay at a military airport in the Alaska district. They were currently having the parts they could use brought in from the Legitimacy Kingdom maintenance bases for the Snow Quake and Active Sledge.

The balance of power in the Alaska district had grown unstable once more.

The Legitimacy Kingdom had controlled it up to that point, but they had now lost every single one of their Objects there. It was the perfect chance for another world power to strike back.

However, there was no reason to be pessimistic.

A few of the Objects waiting in the Atlantic Ocean had switched over to acting as a defensive line for the Alaska district. With the Indigo Plasma, the dummy models, and the rest of the 24th's military power gone, there was no longer any reason to keep those other Objects away.

And so…

Having decided all danger was gone, Quenser sat in the military airport's mess hall with his upper body limply lying atop the table.

"Eh? So the TV show filming here was CSMilitary Channel!?"

"What? Are you a fan of the idol?"

"No, I'm not a fan. Oh, man. This is bad. This is really, really bad. There's no way she doesn't hold a grudge against me. She was as haughty as ever even after her family fell to ruin."

"?"

Heivia frowned.

He was unaware that Quenser had known a former noble girl when he was young. Naturally, he also knew nothing about how that former noble girl's family had hid in his storehouse.

"Ugh, how horrible," said Froleytia as she rubbed at her own shoulder. "The higher ups are still arguing over who gets to take credit for this. The Snow Quake and Active Sledge insist they contributed to the victory, so they want to be treated favorably. Well, they need to have their Objects reconstructed, so I understand that they need any help they can get. I just wish they wouldn't get me involved. There is a ton of paperwork for this kind of thing."

"I'm amazed you didn't snap and punch one of the higher ups."

"Quenser, what kind of person do you think I am? I am Froleytia Capistrano, a kindhearted, peace-loving, persistently-just , pure, and lovely female commander. Do you really think I could do anything as immodest as that?"

"…If you were really the kind of person you claim to be, you wouldn't have captured us and then lectured us for over 3 hours while we were still exhausted from battling the Indigo Plasma."

"Heivia, if you do not like lectures, perhaps you would rather be thrown into the detention barracks without a word. Arctic prisons are said to be worse than Abashiri."

Froleytia then placed a few pieces of paper on the table.

"What are those? Do we have to write a ton of reports, too?"

"No, this is from that military CS broadcast crew. They want us to fill out a survey to give them material to talk about back in the studio. Well, after getting such exciting footage, I'm sure the members of the staff are shedding tears of joy."

"There's no way they'll be allowed to air footage of a conflict between Legitimacy Kingdom battalions."

As Quenser and the others looked down at the survey, the princess walked up. She had clearly been worn down physically by the consecutive battles.

She circled around behind Quenser and read the survey over his shoulder.

"What is this?"

"A survey for that TV show."

Quenser, Heivia, the princess, and Froleytia read through the questions prepared by the TV station.

One read:

Question 4: In recent years, the age of soldiers in the military has grown remarkably younger. Do you see anything wrong with having minors head to the front lines?

The four muttered the same thing in unison.

They seemed truly puzzled and did not realize the darkness they carried.

"…No, not at all."

"Oh, right," said Froleytia as she lit her long, narrow Japanese kiseru after they had finished with the surveys. "Quenser, I hear you hired a small Capitalist Corporations PMC on Victoria Island."

"What!?" Sensing a new lecture on the horizon, Quenser's shoulders jumped. "Wh-what are you talking about…?"

"Supposedly, you paid them with jewels you stole from the diamond mine on the Kamchatka Peninsula."

"Kyaaaaahhhhh!?"

She knew it all.

Quenser paled as he was sure he would be stuck in the seiza position with a boot digging into him until morning. Various circumstances were likely going to make him lose any reward he might have gotten for destroying the Objects. At the very best, he would break even. However, hiring Wydine's small Capitalist Corporations PMC had been his only option at the time. If he had not, the immigrant residential city would have been turned into a sea of flames. Quenser was not about to overestimate his own abilities.

"The lecture can wait until later, but I would like to check on something first. Quenser, what was the name of this small PMC?"

"B-Battlefield Cleanup Service…I think."

"Hmm. So what I heard over the radio was accurate."

Quenser finally realized Froleytia had learned about it from the radio transmissions. However, Froleytia did not seem particularly mad. Her expression was one of doubt, not anger.

Yes.

Doubt.

"Quenser."

"Y-yes!?"

"Are you sure the name of the small PMC you hired was Battlefield Cleanup Service? Are you sure that was its official name and not just a nickname?"

"Well, I don't really know any of the specifics. But they used it kind of like a name."

"Listen closely." Froleytia's expression suddenly grew serious as she puffed out some smoke. "When compiling the documents I need for the post-mission debriefing, I contacted the Capitalist Corporations military. They base all their actions in wealth and economics. Their military is entirely made up of PMCs. Everything from Object maintenance to bodyguards are registered with mercenary companies. But they have no record of a small PMC with a pleasant name like Battlefield Cleanup Service."

"What?"

"My contact with the Capitalist Corporations military may have been feigning ignorance, or the Battlefield Cleanup Service may simply be unlicensed. However, we do know that the Capitalist Corporations military does not officially have a mercenary company by that name. I plan to hand this over to the intelligence department, but then our unit will likely never learn of the answer."

Froleytia gave a bitter smile of resignation when she saw the look on Quenser's face.

She ended the conversation with one last comment.

"It seems you have met some troublesome people without even realizing it, Quenser."

A 10-wheeled armored vehicle returned to its maintenance base zone. The back hatch opened and five female mercenaries climbed out. At the front was Wydine, a girl with blonde hair and brown skin.

"Hello, we're back."

A female officer came out to meet them. That would not normally be necessary, but she must have had nothing better to do. She may have just wanted the exercise. Her exercising had gone from being a hobby to being a daily quota.

The female officer gestured toward the armored vehicle. Realizing what she meant, Wydine headed over to the side of the vehicle.

"Whoops. Charm, Lemish. Peel off this label for the Battlefield Cleanup Service."

"Yeah, it is a fake name."

"Sorry, but some of it isn't coming off. How about we leave it as a code name? At the very least, we need to get the other label off. Don't forget to peel off the Capitalist Corporations label."

"We made a lot of money this time."

"Yes, I never thought we would end up with diamonds. These intelligence operations would be a lot more fun if they always turned out like this."

"That's more normal in the Capitalist Corporations. How about you head there?"

"Don't joke. I'm just saying it makes for a nice bonus. I never said I wanted to live a life of being manipulated by money."

They continued speaking as they worked to remove the labels from the armored vehicle. Before long, it no longer looked like a vehicle from the Capitalist Corporations.

The female officer then said, "What about the dummy Objects that used a strategic AI?"

"They were blown to pieces," replied the girl who used the fake name Wydine. "I was worried some of the data or integrated circuits would remain, but that low-stability plasma explosion was enough to ensure nothing can be recovered. That was individual research of Prizewell City Slicker rather than something officially developed by the Legitimacy Kingdom military, so destroying those should prevent it from spreading to the rest of the Legitimacy Kingdom. …Speaking of which, what happened to the 24th's development department?"

"A different unit found them and destroyed them. All research data related to the strategic AI was lost."

"They certainly are petty," said Wydine with a grin. "Just because his position in the Legitimacy Kingdom was in danger is no reason to send a spy to one of our Information Alliance military projects and steal information on strategic AIs."

"They may have had the link between the main Object and the dummy models, but their failure lay in being unable to mass produce the Elites they needed."

"The strategic AIs represented by Juliet are the specialty of the Information Alliance, so we refuse to allow another world power to develop their own." Wydine pulled out the rubber box filled with diamonds, checked on the contents, and shrugged. "How horrible."

"Just as they cast their shadow in the Legitimacy Kingdom, we cast our shadow in the Information Alliance." The female officer did not seem to mind. "A utopia is not created so easily."

"Oh, that did not sound like something you would hear from a commander entrusted with troops to protect such an ideal, Lieutenant Colonel Lendy Farolito."

The female commander smiled at hearing her name.

Wydine looked around and asked, "Where is our idol Elite? Has that misunderstanding been resolved yet?"

"…Yes, somehow or other. That Legitimacy Kingdom student must like his irony to use information to damage people like us

who specialize in information. I have gained a slight interest in him."

The clank of a footstep was then heard.

It came from somewhere quite a ways up above them.

They turned to look and saw the Second Generation Gatling 033 . It had been lost in Alaska, but a project under construction had been taken over to replace it. The armaments had been rearranged to make an essentially identical machine. The soldier who was to become its Elite and its maintenance unit would hold a grudge, but they could not overturn an official decision from the higher ups. It was likely the Strategic AI Juliet that led to the higher ups siding with them.

Maintenance scaffolding was set up around the Gatling 033 and a girl of about 10 stood on it.

Thorns could be seen in her gaze as she spoke to Wydine and the others via radio.

"See? He is quite the fascinating gentleman, isn't he? Oh ho ho."

"Yes. He is both generous and clever. I think I might have fallen for my customer♪"

Afterword

I made it to the third volume.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

…This may be the third volume, but I wrote this series with a certain idea in mind. I thought the first volume could be something like a starter pack that explained the basic setting and actions of the characters as well as the makeup and values of the different parts of the world. Then the subsequent volumes could be something like expansion packs. My intention was to have a timeline that continues with each volume, but where you can pick up and enjoy any volume so long as you have the basic information from the first volume. I hope you readers can check to see if I was successful or not.

This time, I think I will divide the afterword up by chapter.

The novel is essentially a collection of short stories, but I intentionally used a more irregular type of construction where plotlines begun in one chapter would be resolved in another.

Regarding Chapter 1:

Up until now, I had always been writing about how amazing the monstrous weapons known as Objects are, so I wrote this chapter as a story describing how amazing the Elites who pilot those Objects are. This was also the first time the protagonist Quenser actually rode inside an Object.

I had wanted to have the princess and the "oh ho ho" fight, and I made the entire chapter have a fairly light atmosphere.

From the beginning, I had designed the "oh ho ho" as an idol that people could get emotionally invested in despite her being a virtual existence.

I came up with the idea of the Information Alliance's strategic AI when thinking about how scary false detections and false decisions of security software could be. What did you think?

Regarding Chapter 2:

For the first time, I put a spy in this story.

With all the fighting left to Objects and infantry not doing as much, I think spies like this would become more common.

I added in the idea of an overall conspiracy here, but if it that was all there was, the overall theme of "fighting Objects" would have been lost. For that reason, I left it at just a taste.

I had always wanted to use an Object that could jump so nimbly it seemed like a joke, so I did that here.

The diamonds that were acquired in a comical manner in this chapter became a very important item in the next chapter.

Regarding Chapter 3:

This was the final battle against the ridiculous enemy of 7 Objects.

I made the key to this chapter be how to strike back at an enemy that seems far too much to handle at first glance.

Prizewell City Slicker's strategy was something like the exact opposite of Sladder Honeysuckle's from Adoption War with a more offensive and powerful slant than the Oceanian military nation.

It was never specified just how much they cut down on costs, but the use of Objects may have greatly changed had they won that battle.

Any readers who thought the Battlefield Cleanup Service appeared rather suddenly are quite perceptive. Their identity and goal become clear in the epilogue. Basically, they had their reasons for being so willing to head into battle against Objects despite living in a world where flesh-and-blood soldiers would never think of doing such a thing.

In Adoption War, I put a lot of focus on speaking with the enemy, but I almost completely ignored that in this story. Be aware that that is not an essential part of this series' theme.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Nagiryo-san and my editor Miki-san. This novel is part of an annoying genre that requires

them to pay attention to a lot of small details that do not necessarily show up in the text. I am truly thankful for their help this time, too.

And I give my thanks to the readers. My intention with this series that I mentioned at the beginning of the afterword was an experiment that required at least 3 volumes to attempt. I truly thank you.

And so, I think I will end this here.

I lay down my pen while hoping this book will remain in your heart in some way.

…I really have given the Information Alliance a lot of amusing characters, haven't I?

-Kamachi Kazuma